

## Chapter 1 Three Stand Alone

"Susan are you almost finished with the dishes? Your aunt and I would like to see you in the living room."

"Almost done mum. Just a few more." Susan answered cheerfully placing a plate in the drying rack.

She started to work on a silver pot cover. While doing so, she regarded herself in the reflection. Susan Bones was pretty. Not really "cute" and certainly not "gorgeous or stunning". Her eyes had a very nice tint of blue and were framed by an oval face with a clear complexion. One of the two things she always received compliments on were her hair a silky mass of auburn usually in a braid that ran halfway down her back. The other feature was her smile. She almost always had a slight smile on her face. Her best friend Hannah Abbott would commonly mention how Susan had a private joke that she did not want to share.

An outside observer standing in the kitchen of the Bones family manor would see a young woman who had just a few months shy of her seventeenth birthday. Had her birthday been just one week earlier she would be attending her seventh year at Hogwarts instead of her sixth year at the renowned school of magic. Susan was "beginning to bloom" as her mother put it, developing some womanly curves on her five foot six inch frame. One of the more recent developments, especially since it was the summer break and Susan was no longer required to wear the bulky and notoriously unflattering school robes, was her developing bustline. The few boyfriends in her past would often joke how they could get lost in her eyes, but recent encounters with males in her age group found that more often than not the young men's eyes would start at her face and but would quickly drift downward to her cleavage. Susan had confided in her mother how self-conscious this made her feel. Her mother's response was to describe the males in her age group as a "pack of hormone driven, depraved, mangy mongrels with delusions of grandeur".

She completed the last of the dishes. This was Susan's only assigned chore, the manor did after all have a house elf, which would have gladly done this as well as all the other chores, but Susan's mother

and aunt insisted that she do this to enforce a sense of responsibility. Susan certainly did not shy away from hard work; she was after all a hufflepuff. One of the defining characteristics of that house was the willingness to roll up the sleeve and put in a solid effort. It is fortunate that most of the students in that house took great pride in their work ethic, because of the four houses at Hogwarts; Hufflepuff was probably the least respected by the others. The other three houses suffered from their own degrees of arrogance. The Slytherins were noted for their cunning and ambition and saw Hufflepuff loyalty and steadfastness as tools to be used and discarded as necessary. If you need help on an assignment and can't charm a Ravenclaw, then simply say a few kind words to a Hufflepuff drone. If you can't find a date for a Hogsmeade weekend there are always a Hufflepuff or two that could be convinced with a few choice words. The other two houses Gryffindor and Ravenclaw were less contemptible in their treatment of Hufflepuff, but still maintained certain sense of superiority. Both houses appreciated the virtues of loyalty and hard work, but each of the other houses always seemed to have an air of "if you were just a little braver you could have been in Gryffindor or perhaps a bit brighter and you could have been a Ravenclaw". It was an unspoken truth that the other 3 houses believed you were sorted into their houses or "put" into Hufflepuff as if were something of a consolation prize.

"Sorry," Susan said walking in from the kitchen. "It took a little longer than I expected. What did you want to talk to me about?"

Her mother smiled at her. "Well, Amelia has some news she would like to share with us."

"What is it Auntie?"

"It appears that Minister Fudge has lost the no confidence vote. It was not even a close contest. We will be reconvening tomorrow to select a replacement. I have it on good authority that I am the leading candidate to replace him."

"That's fantastic Auntie!" Susan jumped up to give an excited hug. "You will be a wonderful Minister! If anyone can organize that mess Fudge has created it will be you!"

"Thank you Susan. I appreciate the vote of confidence." Amelia Bones replied. "The last Bones to be Minister of Magic was over eighty years ago. You are quite right about the mess the Ministry is in at the moment."

"Auntie, how much of what the Daily Prophet says is true about You-Know-Who being at the Ministry? There were all kinds of rumors at school the last week before the end of the year. A few of Harry Potter's friends were stuck in the infirmary with mysterious injuries and Harry just looked so lost and angry. When Hannah and Ernie tried to approach him about it, he snapped at them like an underfed welsh green. I would have sworn he was just going to start hexing away, but at the last second it was like the rage in him vanished and it was like he shrunk in front of my eyes. Next thing I know he is running out of the Great Hall while the Slytherin's were laying into him about a dead dog or something like that."

Amelia carefully considered her reply to her niece. There was of course the professional answer, suitable for the media trolls that call themselves journalists. It was a simple relaying of some of the facts. A small group of underage wizards along with several ministry employees and Dumbledore encountered a group of Death Eaters and He-Who-Must-Not be named himself in the Ministry. A quick public search by some of the more crafty media trolls had determined that the students arrived there on a "Rescue Mission". Fortunately, Amelia had been able to keep the names (other than Harry's of course) of the other students from publication. It required some heavy-handed use of her powers to accomplish that, but in the end the Daily Prophet relented. Amelia decided that her niece deserved as much of the truth as she could afford to tell.

"Well, you are correct in assuming that your friend Harry and five of his friends were in the Ministry. Where they were and what they were doing there is still classified. I can say that a group of death eaters were there to capture Harry. He and his friends from your little Dueling Club fought well, giving as good, pardon me better than they got until a group consisting of ministry officials and the headmaster arrived. At that same time Voldemort also arrived and the proverbial kneazle was out of the bag. Dumbledore dueled with Voldemort and drove him off. I was able to see a bit of the duel through a pensive

image that Albus was kind enough to 'unofficially' provide to my department. Beyond that Susan, I can not really answer your questions."

"That's okay Auntie. I appreciate the facts rather than the wild speculation. I mean some people are weaving these crazy tales that Sirius Black was there as well and that Harry killed him in a duel for betraying his parents."

Susan's mother who had been listening quietly chose this moment to add her opinion. "You really can't believe all the rumors and innuendo that goes around these days, young lady. People are getting scared. The Ministry just had its first no confidence vote pass in over 200 years. The leaders being kicked out were more concerned with staying in power than believing that there might actually be a threat. The Wizarding Wireless talk show programs aren't helping to ease anyone's paranoia."

"Yes. Quite a turnaround from just a month or two ago, I do believe that your friend Harry was a 'glory seeking, mentally unstable menace' and Albus was a 'senile old coot who needs to be put out to pasture'. Suddenly, they are the lone voices of truth in a suddenly dark time. I saw how badly the Minister was trying to damage Harry Potter last summer. He was called before a full session of the Wizengot for protecting himself from Dementors! He even tried to change the time and place of the hearing at the last minute in the hopes that Albus would miss it! Shameful behavior, absolutely shameful I tell you."

The conversation turned to more pleasant topics as the evening turned into the night. The three were about ready to retire for the evening when there was a loud ringing noise that could be heard throughout the house.

"The wards! Someone is attacking the outer wards. Susan quickly light a fire in the fireplace! We may need to Floo out of here." Amelia shouted drawing her wand. She had a great deal of faith in the wards on her house. They were performed by some of the finest cursebreakers contracted out from Gringotts. Most of the ministry officials had been investing heavily in wards to protect their families

and their homes. The ringing noise, which thankfully only lasted 10 seconds was the intruder detection ward placed at the perimeter of the property. This ward and the muggle-repelling wards constituted the first line of defense for the house. Once the intrusion ward was activated, it triggers a powerful confundo charm to disorient the would-be assailants and a moderately powerful stinger to let them know that they are not welcome here.

"Incendio!" Susan shouted pointing her wand at the fireplace. A fire sprang to life in the hearth. Susan grabbed a handful of Floo powder and tossed it into the fire while shouting for Auror Headquarters. Instead of turning green and connecting to the Floo network as she had expected, the fire stayed its regular color.

"Some-something's wrong with the Floo! It's not working!" Susan stammered.

"Whoever is out there must be running a Floo-Jammer, that's a very powerful jinx. I can't apparate either. I will try a portkey."

Much to Amelia's horror, absolutely nothing happened when she tapped her wand on a throw pillow and shouted "Portus!" She immediately pointed her wand at the painting on the wall and said "Lethal!" This turned on inner layer of wards, which contained fatal combinations of wards designed to kill whomever was outside. She could hear crackle of the wards activating. Her sister-in-law ran to the window.

"Amelia! It looks like they are using Inferni! The wards are destroying some of them, but there are too many! Reducto! Reducto!"

"Susan! Quit trying the fireplace and help your mother. Don't use Incendio, it will just set our house on fire. Use cutters and blasters! I won't sugarcoat this, someone is out there running anti-Floo, anti-portkey and anti-apparation curses. That takes a tremendous amount of energy. Voldemort is probably here! Let's not make it easy for the bastard!"

Susan ran over to the window just in time to catch her mother, who had just been hit by a jet of red light. Susan cast a quick enervate spell to wake her mother back up. She stepped past her waking

mother and looked out the shattered window. She could still see a small fireworks show on the front lawn as the wards attacked the undead staggering forward. Leveling her wand, she cast a succession of reductor curses at the nearest inferni. A grim smile crossed her face as she watched the magically animated abomination fall and not rise again. Susan estimated that there were at least a dozen inferni still shuffling towards the house. A loud gong signaled that the wards had expended their energy. From here they were on their own. Susan raised a quick shield to protect her from a stunner fired by one of the figures circling behind the inferni. The stunner bounced away harmlessly.

By this time her mother had joined her at the window using reductor curses on the remaining inferni. They settled into a pattern where Susan shielded her mother from incoming hexes and her mother blasted away at the inferni. They were only able to stay at the window for another minute before the first inferni reached the windows and doors.

"Dana! Susan! Fall back behind the defenses I have transfigured." Amelia shouted to her sister-in-law and niece.

Susan and her mother retreated back into the room. She could only admire her Aunt's skill at transfiguration. The three porcelain statues of dogs had been transformed into living snarling mastiffs, which leapt on the inferni trying to get through the broken window. Where the couch and recliners once stood, there were now stone walls. Susan vainly tried the fireplace again to see if the Floo network was available. She had just crouched behind one of the stone walls when the front door blew inward. She watched as her aunt banished the coffee table right into the path of the door fragments. It flew through them and smashed into the surprised death eater standing in the doorframe. She followed it with a lavender colored curse, which Susan identified as a rather nasty bone breaking curse.

"Them or us ladies! Don't hold back! Don't waste your time with stunners! Make them hurt and bleed!"

Susan blanched slightly at her aunt's viscous statement, but you don't rise to the head of magical law enforcement without being able

having a brutal side. Susan took mental inventory of the best spells at her disposal silently thanking Harry Potter for helping her and the others in the DA perfect them. The reductor curse was by far her best offensive spell, although she was quite good with cutting curses. Sadly, she remembered hearing Harry and his "inner circle" deciding to teach bone breakers in the coming sessions of the DA, when Umbridge and her little Slytherin pets managed to break up the DA with that little traitor Edgecombe's help.

Susan looked at one of the transfigured dogs that had been hurled back into the room. Using a simple levitation spell. She raised the dog above the door jam and waited for the next death eater to come through the opening.

The next death eater was slightly more cunning than his predecessor. He shoved an inferni ahead of him to take the damaging curses. It would have been a very good plan had Susan not dropped a sixty-kilo mastiff on top of him. By the time one of his cohorts slew the animated dog with a cutting curse, the death eater was bleeding badly from wounds on his face, neck and arms. Her aunt caught her eye long enough to smile at her for a well played maneuver.

Curses flew across the living room for the next minute. The last of the inferni had fallen and was no longer able to rise. Unable to stand, it dragged itself along the floor towards Dana Bones. Dana finished it with a pair of well placed cutting curses that severed the creature's head.

Amelia did a quick mental tally. They had eliminated two dozen inferni and at least one if not two death eaters. She felt slightly lightheaded from the transfigurations and the volleys of curses. Too many years of leading department meetings and processing paperwork, not enough time spent channeling her magic. Dana seemed to be fairing even worse. Her sister-in-law had never been a very powerful witch to begin with and her exhaustion was only barely masked by her determination to protect her daughter. Susan seemed to be holding up quite well. Amelia recalled some of the bits of information that Susan shared from those meetings of "Dumbledore's Army". One that seemed to stand out was "dodge it if you can – shield it if you can't".

This emphasized young wizard's and witch's better physical conditioning and allowed them to conserve their magical energy.

"Ah Amelia!" A loud and almost inhuman voice hissed. "So nice of you to welcome us into your home this evening."

With that most of the front wall simply vanished. There in haze was Voldemort and six more death eaters. He looked even more frightening than when Amelia had seen him in Dumbledore's memory. His minions, who had previously been held at the door, now stood tall in his presence unwilling to show fear or hesitation in the face of their master.

"Kill the witches! Capture the girl!" Voldemort commanded.

Amelia swallowed hearing they wanted Susan alive, but that seemed to help her find a second wind as she began trading curses with Voldemort himself. Her first volley consisted of a bone breaker quickly followed by a cutter. For all the pomp and terror he inspired, Amelia knew that Voldemort was still a wizard – an unbelievably powerful one, but still a wizard. She wanted to see how maintaining the escape prevention wards, defeating the house's wards and vanishing a large hole in the entranceway had taxed his energy. The dark lord shielded the bone breaker and most of the cutter, but Amelia gained some satisfaction hearing him hiss in pain as a gash opened on his left shoulder.

"Bitch! You will suffer!" Voldemort screamed as he responded with a powerful blasting curse, which shattered her transfigured wall spraying her with debris. She gasped in pain as chunks of rock embedded in her arm she shielded her face with. Amelia instinctively rolled to her right and sent a poorly aimed cutter back in his direction. She was distracted momentarily by a jet of green light crossing the room to strike Dana Bones in the chest. She heard Susan's blood curdling scream as Dana fell lifeless to the ground.

Summoning all her remaining strength she cast the most powerful spell she had at her disposal. Hoping that he would not have the energy to properly shield himself, she unleashed a powerful bludgeoning curse nicknamed "The Devastator".



Voldemort saw the golden ray and heard Amelia shout “Impactus Magnus”. Still feeling the sting from his earlier injury and knowing that Madam Bones was now playing her endgame, he met this challenge as he had met all those before. There was a reason he had risen to power following Gridenwald’s destruction. He possessed a savage determination to succeed. The year’s following his graduation from Hogwart’s and his transformation into the Dark Lord were marked with terrifyingly brutal battles that ranged across six of the seven continents. The “light” side had rejoiced at the fall of Gridenwald and was so caught in their euphoria that most failed to notice the struggle for supremacy fought in the 1950’s and 1960’s amongst dark wizards. Who indeed would care if a few more dark wizards disappeared battling amongst themselves? It was a testament to his cunning and ruthlessness that he prevailed where the other competitor’s failed at the cost of their lives. This was the Voldemort the world should remember, victorious and towering over the corpses of his enemies. Certainly not the Dark Lord felled by a blood magic charm placed on an infant by a witch moments before her death. He would rewrite that legacy with an ocean of blood if needed.

“Bludgeness Negatus!” The Dark Lord chanted channeling his energy into a shield specifically designed to counter bludgeoning curses. The curse impacted on the shield and the battle now became a test of magical reserves, willpower and sheer survival instinct. The point where curse and shield collided crackled with energy as both combatants poured their everything into their spells. The crackling energy continued for ten full seconds before the golden ray from the witch’s wand began to noticeably weaken and fade. Voldemort smiled a feral grin. Amelia Bones was a powerful witch, who fought with an impressive zeal, but she was not conditioned to facing her death on a regular basis. He was. Every battle was a chance for his plans for immortality to unravel. Every duel was a primal scream of rage at an indifferent universe that did not care who lives and who dies. He would make the universe care!

He smiled as Madam Bones dropped to her knees, magically exhausted. “Well fought, Amelia, but your best quite simply was not enough. To honor your fighting spirit, I grant you a quick and relatively painless death.”

Amelia Bones struggled to her feet. She would not die on her knees before this monster! As the green energy began to gather at the tip of her enemy's wand, she glanced over at Susan. Her niece stood frozen like a statue in a full body bind. She smiled a brave smile for her niece and turned to face her executioner.

"You win this day, but your end will come." She stated as the killing curse struck her.

Many miles from the battle, in the smallest bedroom in a well kept house a young man woke with a start from a nightmare. He grabbed his glasses and a roughly foot long stick of holly from his nightstand. Not really knowing how he was able to perform this and uncaring of the consequences, he reached for an empty cola can and muttered a single word.

"Portus!"

## Chapter 2 Confrontation

Susan watched wordlessly as her aunt Amelia died. She had been placed in a full body bind, while attempting to cast a cutting curse. Her mother had died mere moments before and the horror of her situation was already starting to sink in. Less than 20 minutes ago they had been discussing how her Aunt would reshape the ministry and now both her Aunt and her mother were dead and she was helpless.

In front of her stood the epitome of evil, Lord Voldemort. If there was any comfort to be had, Susan thought he looked exhausted from the battle. Auntie Amelia fought him to the bitter end, but Susan couldn't dwell on that or her mother's death now. She knew that she was in grave danger. They wanted her alive for some reason and she doubted that their plans were in her best interest.

Voldemort reached into his cloak and retrieved a potion vial. He uncorked it and drained its contents adding some color to his previously pale complexion.

"Let us collect our prize and leave." He said to the remaining death eaters.

Susan saw one of them approach from the corner of her eye. He took the wand from her paralyzed hands and released her from the body bind while grabbing her wrist roughly. Now wandless and practically helpless, she began to shake at her predicament. It was at that exact moment that all hell broke loose. She heard the sound of a body falling to the ground.

"Pryus Impactus!" She heard a voice cry out as the stranger stabbed his wand towards the Dark Lord. She had never seen this curse performed before, only reading a description of a powerful spell that earned the nickname "Smash and Burn". The spell combines a moderately powerful bludgeoning curse with a jet of fire. It was illegal to use in match duels, but fell short of being categorized as an Unforgivable. Whoever he was, the new combatant was not pulling any punches.

Voldemort erected a hasty shield, but it lacked the necessary energy to fully protect him. The spell shattered the protection and hit the Dark Lord in the chest, sending him a dozen feet backwards and out the gaping hole created in the front of the house. Susan saw him scream in rage clutching his chest with his wand hand and using the other to brush flames away. It was as if time had stood still during those moments as even his minions had been frozen during the exchange. The stranger in the smoke and haze had used this to his advantage. He tapped the throw pillow that her aunt had used to create a port key earlier and banished it at a death eater, who had been tending the injuries of one of his cohorts. Instead of bouncing off the death eater it stuck to the side of his head and the surprised Death Eater and the woman whose arm he was mending disappeared.

Susan stared open-mouthed wondering how the stranger could have known that Amelia had turned the pillow into a portkey. She shook herself out of her reverie and began to struggle with the Death Eater who had her arm. She clawed at the exposed flesh on his face and neck where his mask did not protect him. The man gasped in pain and rage and began to manhandle her using his larger size and strength as leverage against her. Susan was already regretting her decision to struggle with the obviously larger opponent. Looking back it would have been easier for her to have escaped his grasp and dive for her mother's wand, but she had committed to this plan on instinct. She could see the barely contained rage in her assailant's eyes as he smacked her roughly across her face. The sting of the blow stunned her momentarily and she released her grip on the man's wand arm as she stumbled away from the blow. Susan breathlessly waited for the next blow or curse, which strangely did not come. When her vision cleared, she saw the Death Eater was dropping to the ground stupefied. She immediately lunged forward to retrieve her wand from the ground. It was only then that she managed to catch the face of her rescuer. Her knight-in-shining armor wore only a pair of gray sweatpants and glasses. A mass of unruly black hair covered his head. He had the look of a person who had just been awakened from sleep with the exception of the grim expression on his face and the fire burning in his green eyes. As if her night had not been strange enough, she realized that her rescuer was none other than Harry Potter.

“Harry! What are you doing here!”

“Later. Reducto! Impactus! Protego! Fight now talk later!” He grunted in reply sending curses towards a Death Eater and raising a shield.

Susan fired a quick cutting curse at another Death Eater, while scanning the area for any sign of Voldemort. She did not see him anywhere and concluded that he must have apparated away. This made her blood race and her heart hammer in her ribcage. A boy her age had driven off the Dark Lord! Letting herself be distracted was a costly error.

“Imperio!” Susan heard a voice say, but she suddenly seemed unable to focus on her surroundings.

“Kill Potter!” The Death Eater by the shattered window commanded.

“Yes.” Susan thought in a detached manner. Harry had been very helpful coming here this evening, but it was perfectly reasonable that she should kill him now. She was in the process of raising her wand to shoot a cutting curse at him, when Harry stepped inside her guard and smacked her wand out of her hand. At the same time he sent a burst of magic towards the man controlling her.

“How dare he hit me.” Susan thought to herself. He really must suffer now.

“My wife will be so disappointed that she isn’t here to see you boy! She has been so happy since she got rid of her mutt of a brother. Such poor aim you have there boy.” Rudolpho Lestrangle taunted Harry, while urging his puppet to kill him.

“Wasn’t aiming for you. Ouch! Dammit! Susan snap out of it!” Harry muttered as he fended her off with his non-wand arm only to have her bite it. Harry’s charm had hit the tattered remains of the burgundy drapes and they now sprang to life coiling around the sole remaining Death Eater. Lestrangle struggled with the window treatment as Harry threw Susan down to the ground on top of the previously stunned Death Eater. Free for the moment, Harry dive rolled forward underneath a cutting curse that still managed to open a gash on his right shoulder. He gasped in pain, but had closed the distance to a

mere six feet between him and Lestrangle. It was here that Harry had wanted to say something really witty and malicious, but a painful memory of his godfather toying with this man's wife combined with Harry's general lack of witty banter to begin with dissuaded him.

Harry simply leveled his wand at the struggling Death Eater could only come up with "Reducto!"

Rudolpho Lestrangle had been lucky to escape the debacle at the Department of Mysteries. He was separated from the main pack of Death Eaters and became lost. Disillusioning himself, he managed to sneak out of the Ministry and apparate back to a safe house, while Dumbledore and the Aurors had rounded the others up. His master had actually been pleased that he had escaped, reserving his ire for the imprisoned Lucius Malfoy for leading that doomed assault. In the brief moment it took for the Reductor curse to cross the short distance and strike him in the face he had a chance to reconsider whether he had actually been lucky to escape that day.

Harry grimaced in disgust as he watched a fine bloody mist and assorted brain matter spray out the window. He had just killed a man. He should feel ashamed, but he did not. He should be angry, but instead he just felt empty. It certainly would not bring Sirius Black back. He should have stunned him and the ministry could have interrogated him, but when Harry had raised his wand he knew that the word "Stupefy" was not in his current vocabulary. He had spent so much of the last two weeks since the term had ended wondering how he was going to kill someone, when he realized that killing Voldemort or his minions was not much different than killing Quirrell in his first year. Once he accepted the fact that he had already killed a man, he stopped berating himself on that topic. Harry knew at that moment that his innocence died the second his godfather fell through the veil in the Department of Mysteries.

Susan had been scrambling to recover her wand and was in the process of raising it when she saw Harry kill Rudolpho Lestrangle. The fog that had clouded her mind lifted and she let the curse she had been forming die on her lips.

“Harry! I am so sorry! I couldn't fight it!” She said in an almost pleading tone. She was starting to hyperventilate as the evening's events caught up with her.

“Take it easy, Susan. Calm down. You need to stay focused. Stay with me.” Harry said in a calm but reassuring tone. “We need to call for some help or get ourselves out of here.”

Harry walked over towards her stopping at the stunned Death Eater. He quickly removed the mask and just as quickly began cursing under his breath. The stunned Death Eater was none other than Severus Snape.

“Holy Merlin Harry! Its Snape! The greasy shit is a Death Eater! Everyone always suspected. Harry what are you doing?”

Harry had tossed Snape's mask aside and vanished it. He changed the color of the potion master's robes from black to green. He grabbed Snape's wand off the ground and cast a quick “envenerate” on Snape.

“Please trust me Susan.” Harry said with a pleading quality in his voice.

“Potter!” Snape sneered. “What in the hell are you doing here?”

For a change Harry actually had a witty comeback ready. “I was bored in my summer prison. It has been a few weeks since I ran foolishly into a battle. Plus, there is the added bonus of seeing you again. Are you coherent enough to apparate out of here?”

Severus Snape was about to answer when the cracks of multiple apparitions could be heard on the lawn. Moments later they heard a voice.

“Ministry of Magic! Lay down your wands step outside!”

“Shit!” Harry muttered looking at Susan and then his most hated instructor. “New plan. You were with me the whole time and we came here together. Susan, I will explain all of this later, but trust me and follow my lead for the moment.”

Conrad Dawlish was not having a good week. Up until a few days ago he had been the Minister of Magic's personal bodyguard. Now, he had been relegated to leading the second shift rapid response unit. It was not exactly a position that was widely sought. It was only slightly more popular than the Defense against Dark Arts position at Hogwarts. From 2pm until midnight they waited for the watch captain to dispatch them to a location that may or may not be teeming with people ready to kill them. Usually the delicate instruments in the bowels of the ministry would detect high concentrations of magical activity and the response team would apparate or portkey to the coordinates. Sadly, Dawlish realized that this week had been anything but usual.

They were in the ready room when an alarm signifying an incoming portkey activated. Everyone grabbed their wands, because there was no current team in the field. The seven aurors in the room were quite surprised when two people in full Death Eater regalia appeared directly in their ready room. The man had a decorative pillow attached to his head. Five stunners immediately hit them and they fell to the ground.

Lars Anders, the watch captain ran into the room shouting "illegal portkey usage at Madam Bones's residence!" He stopped when he saw the two stunned Death Eaters.

"Holy Merlin! Edwards stay here and help me bind these two! The rest of you, what are you waiting for? Go! Go! Go!"

Dawlish's training took over. "Apparate to the perimeter and move in. Taber and Harrison left flank! Cortez and Spinnet right flank. I'll take point. Get hot and loose! Wands free! On my mark five, four, three, two, one ..."

The five aurors appeared at the hedgerow and scanned what could only be described as a war zone. Bodies littered the lawn. Evidence of a very thorough and very expensive warding job. Seeing that some of the bodies were already in various stages of decomposition reminded Dawlish of his early days during He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's first reign.



“Inferni! Be careful! Taber and Cortez disillusion yourselves. Make it look like we are a threesome.” He hissed using a privacy charm to prevent his team from being overheard.

Triggering a vision charm he scanned the damage from the battle. One freshly dead body was on the porch and another was bent backwards out the window. He had never particularly liked Madam Bones, but he respected her. From the look of things, she put up one hell of a fight.

“Ministry of Magic! Lay down your wands and step outside.”

A minute later three people emerged, with no wands visible. The first was a man in green robes; he recognized the figure as Severus Snape. The other two were teenagers. The girl was slightly supporting the boy and he seemed to be whispering reassurances in the girl’s ear.

“Harry!” Susan hissed. “How can you of all people cover for that slimeball?”

“He’s working for the headmaster. That’s all I can say until we are alone. Dumbledore trusts him.”

“Do you trust him?”

Harry wanted to scream “Hell NO!” Instead he merely said, “I don’t have a choice at the moment.” He winced in pain from the gash on his arm and he wasn’t even sure where the curse burn on his thigh had come from.

“Snape! On the ground now!”

“He’s with us!” Harry yelled.

“And just who in the nine hells are you?”

“Harry Potter. She’s Susan Bones and you have already met Professor Snape. Voldemort was just here! We need to leave now before he sends reinforcements.”

“Shit! Potter is here. Spinnet. Move up and secure these three! Harrison, you and I are going to check out the house.” Dawlish said knowing that the disillusioned partners would follow and cover their backsides. His mind was spinning. What was Potter doing here? Dumbledore usually has his golden child in the suburbs. Was he being moved around? It didn’t add up. Madam Bones clashed with Dumbledore almost as much as she fought with Fudge.

Dawlish moved to the front of the house flanked by Harrison. The Death Eater on the porch looked as if a wild animal had mauled him. He removed the mask, but did not recognize the youthful face that had been revealed.

“Newbie.” He muttered. The Dark Lord was already recruiting children.

“Circe’s rings!” Auror Harrison cried out. “We can scratch Rudolpho Lestrangle from the wanted list. Someone blew his brains out the back of his ruddy head!”

He scanned the living room. Madam Bones and a second woman looked like they had received the killing curse. There were no other bodies to be seen. Curse burns and magic residue wallpapered the space.

“Sir.” Doug Spinnet called out. “Potter is injured. Permission to take them to the sanctuary point three for healing and statements?”

“Make sure you take there wands first.” Dawlish didn’t believe for a minute that they would drop their wands. Hell he wouldn’t have either if the Dark Lord had actually been here.

Harry watched as Susan and Professor Snape handed over their wands. Reluctantly, he parted with his own wand. The auror was muttering about getting something for a temporary portkey.

“Wait here sir,” Harry said. With that, he staggered over to the porch and picked up the two fragments of Lestrangle’s Death Eater mask. Doug Spinnet had heard his little sister talk quite a bit about the young celebrity she played with on the Gryffindor quiddictth squad, but he was unprepared for the cold and distant look on Harry’s face as he offered half of the broken mask to him.

“Why this?” The auror challenged.

“Wanted to take it with me. Reckon I should find a way to send it to his wife, so she has something to remember him.”

The three gawked at Harry. Even Snape was shocked that Dumbledore’s golden boy would take a trophy from a kill and the audacity to plan to send it to Bellatrix Lestrange. He had seen Bella’s psychotic episodes and getting this would definitely cause one worth seeing. Though he would not admit it, Professor Snape was impressed with the whelp. Still, Snape was not about to allow the ignorant fool to act without considering the ramifications of his actions.

“Don’t be foolish Potter! Taunting her would only send her in a fit of rage to find ways to hurt you. No, she would not immediately come after you. She would go after your friends and their parents. This is not some little prank war with those pathetic Weasley twins.”

The angry fire in his eyes dampened and the darkness on his face lifted. He seemed to shrink almost before their eyes. Susan blinked hard as the bold warrior, who had appeared from the ether and drove back Voldemort suddenly transformed into an awkward and embarrassed looking teenager.

“You are right sir.” Harry almost whispered. “Let’s get out of here.”

This of course left Susan with even more questions. Only moments ago, Snape had been dragging her off to the Dark Lord’s grasp and now he was insulting Harry like nothing had ever happened. Amazingly enough Harry had just taken it in stride. She was beginning to dread Harry’s promised explanation almost as much as she was determined to hear it. With all these thoughts clouding her mind and the ever-present feelings that any moment she was going to lose control of her emotions, she felt the pull of the portkey.

They landed in an area with several beds and a mediwizard waiting for them. He quickly assessed the arrivals and began treating Harry’s injuries. Doug Spinnet started to pull Susan and Professor Snape aside for questioning, when Harry called out to him.

“Sir. Would you mind taking my statement while the healer patches me up? It helps take the edge of the pain.”

“Oh sure.” Doug was actually eager to talk to the Boy Who Lived, so eager that he did not catch the expression of relief that crossed Susan’s face.

“I was at my home doing some extra training with Professor Snape, when I had a vision. Apparently, there must be a little seer in me. I saw Voldemort attacking Susan’s house. I snapped out of my trance and we portkeyed to her house. Voldemort had just left and they were going to take Susan with them if Professor Snape and I had not stopped them. He drove a couple of them off, while I fought with Lestranger.”

“Who made the portkey?”

“Uh, well I did sir.”

“They are teaching fifth years how to make portkeys?” The auror asked skeptically.

“No sir. I kind of did it with accidental magic. You can check my wand. I think it was tied to the power of my vision.” Harry offered looking embarrassed.

“So let me get this straight. You have a vision, create an illegal portkey without using a wand directly to where He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is, knowingly portkey there and the good professor fights off some Death Eaters while you give old Rudolpho’s head a new innie and an outie?”

“Yes sir. I don’t really know what I was thinking. I am sorry I risked your life like that Professor.” He said looking sheepishly at the potion master.

Susan had to admire Harry’s acting skills. She wasn’t sure how Harry had arrived. She had assumed Harry had received special training on how to apparate, but his admission that he made a portkey and a wandless one to boot surprised her! She returned to the “facts” Harry

was relaying, knowing that she would have to make sure that nothing she said contradicted his version.

“Did you consider stunning Lestrangle?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“He had Susan under Imperius. I was wearing out real quick and I was pretty sure that Lestrangle’s curse would not wear off if he was just stunned. So I reduced him point blank.”

The auror stopped the dictation quill for a moment and carefully looked at Harry. “If you had to do it again, Mr. Potter?”

“Him or Susan? Do you even have to ask?” Harry said without hesitation wincing a little as the mediwizard rubbed some veela cream on his curse burn.

“That’s what I figured. My sister Alicia played quidditch with you. She told me that you want to be an Auror after Hogwarts. From what I have seen, you won’t have a problem with it.”

“Thank you sir. Alicia is a good friend. I heard she was thinking about going pro. Did she ever get a tryout?” Harry asked steering the conversation away from the battle.

“Oh yes. She had two good ones with Falmouth and Chudley and one not so good one with Holyhead. I think she will at least make second squad. Well I need to get Ms. Bone’s and Mr. Snape’s statements. So why don’t you relax? There is a break room down the hall on the right. Go get yourself something to drink. I will send the others down to join you.”

“Thank you sir.” Harry said as he slowly walked out of the room favoring his injured leg. Somewhat pleased with himself he thought that things were beginning to look up for the moment. That moment became short lived as he rounded the corner and saw the face of Albus Dumbledore. The headmaster’s eyes were completely devoid of their customary twinkle.

“I see you have had a busy evening Mr. Potter. Perhaps you would like to join me for a brief discussion.”

### Chapter 3 A Chat in the Breakroom

"Well sir," Harry said with the slightest hint of sarcasm, "I was just headed to the breakroom. Would you care to join me?"

They walked in uneasy silence down the corridor. It had been less than a month since the Department of Mysteries and the emotional wounds still oozed. The prophecy revealed to Harry that night hung in the air damning them with its presence. For his part, Harry had planned to apologize for destroying the Headmaster's property that night, but at the moment he would sooner apologize to the Dursley's for breathing around them.

The room was empty when the pair entered. It was a medium sized room with a pair of tables, couch and cooling box. Resting on one of the tables were several pitchers containing various beverages and a warming plate filled with biscuits. The far wall was plastered with Death Eater wanted posters. A magazine rack sat next to the cooling box. Harry promptly poured himself a glass of water from a pitcher and sat on end of the couch. The headmaster chose to remain standing.

"Harry," Albus started.

"Perhaps a silencing charm is in order sir?" Harry said quietly. Albus agreed and with a quick incantation their privacy was ensured.

"You will explain yourself." This was not a question, but a statement.

Harry's voice had a mechanical quality to it as he started to explain. "A vision. Voldemort was attacking the Bones residence. I could feel him wearing out as I woke up. Somehow, I made a Portkey and got there. I surprised him and his Death Eaters. Hit him with everything I had. I drove him off. Susan was wrestling with a Death Eater. I stunned him. Then I fought Rudolphus Lestrangle. I killed him. I unmasked the stunned Death Eater and found it was Professor Snape. Lied to the Aurors. I said Snape had come with me. Hopefully, I convinced Susan to go along with it."

The old headmaster listened as Harry finished his summary. "You do realize how foolhardy tonight's adventure was? I am very

disappointed in you Harry. I will be placing wards on your residence that prevents the usage of your newly acquired skill of making illegal portkeys. Knowing what you do, you went alone into combat against Voldemort and a number of his followers. Thus, I am beginning to question your decision making."

He gathered his breath to say more when Harry cut him off. "My decision making! My decision making. You want to stand there and criticize my decision making. Let's take a quick look at your decision making. With the exception of Professor Lupin, every one of your choices to teach us how to defend ourselves has either been incompetent, a sadist, a Death Eater, or possessed by Tom for crying out loud! Knowing what you do, you would think you could have arranged to have someone worthwhile teach us? How about testing the staff for polyjuice every now and then? You seem to pride yourself on knowing exactly what all your students are doing, but how about your staff? I know where your precious Potion's master was tonight! Do you? He was working at his other job. You know the one with the mask! He was helping Tom kill the Bones's and kidnap Susan. He looked right at home smacking her right across the face. Yet anytime I even begin to question his loyalty, you give me nothing! If recent history - and I am not talking about that worthless crap Binns is always on about, has taught me anything it has made me realize that you can be fooled!"

As Harry was venting his anger, he had risen to his feet. Wild magic was circulating in the room like a vortex crackling with energy. If one had looked at the wanted posters on the wall, they would see all the pictures who had previously wore grim, taunting or maniacal expressions now had an almost universal look of uneasy fear about them. To his credit, Albus Dumbledore stood his ground in the swirling maelstrom. He muttered an almost wordless protective spell to shield him from the fluctuations of magic that pulsed through the room. The boy - no young man had several valid points, but the ancient legend was a master orator who did not concede easily.

"Your attempts to justify your current behavior, by pointing out my past failures does not do you credit Harry! I am more concerned about the future than dwelling on the mistakes of the past. If you have proven one thing tonight, it is that you can look another wizard in the



eye and kill them. What will happen the next time that Draco Malfoy decides to anger you? If he draws his wand will you strike him down as well? Look around you! How do I convince myself to train you in more powerful magics, when you cannot control your anger? I will not merely trade one Dark Lord for another!"

"How do you expect me to control my anger when you surround me with Malfoy, Snape and the Dursley's? Is there a reason why Gryffindor always has so many classes with Slytherin? Every potion class, I had to focus on whether the Slytherin's were going to sabotage my work, try and block out the 'teacher's' taunts and worry about whether my work would be graded poorly or simply vanished and not graded at all! Last year, I even got to have private lessons with Snape directly attacking my mind! What contest in hell did I win to get that? How does living with the Dursley's teach me to control my anger? Don't even pretend that you didn't know how they treat me! If they couldn't beat the magic out of me, they surely couldn't beat tolerance and control into me! Perhaps if I search in the cupboard, where they kept me for most of my life, I will find the elixir of tolerance. Maybe if the Order members you stuck out there were actually allowed to talk to me or teach me something, I might have had something to look forward to. Do you do this each year to figure out where my breaking point is? How far can I be pushed each year before I snap?"

"You are well aware of the reason for your living arrangements. We need every advantage possible right now. As to your question regarding class scheduling, I will admit to attempting to balance the houses. Yes Slytherin and Gryffindor are typically matched together to temper their attitudes. However, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw are also paired so that their attributes will inspire the other house respectively. You make it a point to mention your struggles in potions, but you also have Transfiguration with the Slytherins. It is unfortunate that Severus does not maintain the impartiality that Minerva is able to project, but once again it is not very relevant anymore. You are entering your sixth year and now your NEWT level classes will be mostly combined with all four houses. Harry, you must take control of your emotions. You are very passionate which is normally a very good trait, but passion must be tempered with control. If you continue to define

yourself and your actions by the deeds of others, you will never succeed in becoming the man you want to become.”

“Just remember sir, my life is not some bloody experiment in a potions lab. You can’t take one Potter, stir in hate and discontent, agitate with Malfoy, heat to boiling at the Dursley’s, toss in a couple of friends and simmer at the Burrow. Real life has a way of interfering with both our plans! To address your other subject, if Draco takes the mark and he crosses me, I won’t hesitate to stop him, or anyone else wearing the mask. I also will not hold back out of some sense of fair play. I still feel that we both bear a responsibility for Sirius’s death, but if he didn’t waste his breath taunting Bellatrix ...” Harry let the statement trail off as dark emotions played across his face.

Silence filled the room as each combatant reevaluated their respective position. Both of them realized that the other had a persuasive argument and was firmly entrenched in their opinion. Both acknowledged silently how damaged their relationship had become. The wild magic that had threatened to demolish the room had all but vanished. Harry had been clenching his hands so hard that he now felt his fingernails digging into the flesh of his palm.

After another minute of tangible quiet, the headmaster started again. “It is apparent that we cannot change each other’s view. So the question now becomes how do we move forward? If you can devise an effective means for dealing with your relatives, which does not involve violence or more threats of violence, then I will be happy to evaluate it. I will also relax the restrictions on those assigned to guard you, so that they can at the very least speak to you. I would rather not have them instructing you, as their primary duty is to be on the lookout for trouble, but I do believe a daily tutoring session at Mrs. Figg’s could be arranged without taxing our resources further. In turn, I must ask that you begin to take your anger management problems very seriously. Many in your age group feel the need to rebel against authority and though I had hoped you would be given the opportunity to enjoy a somewhat normal childhood. I believe that both of us can agree that this just is not going to be the case.”

Harry looked at the headmaster. It was a start. At the very least, he was discussing options with him rather than handing out orders to be implemented.

“Exactly how much longer must I stay there this year?”

“One more week.”

“How about we bribe them with a vacation to the beach for the next week and I can get some peace and quiet?”

“I think that could be arranged. We must also soon deal with the unpleasant reality of Mr. Black’s will. I have been delaying it for as long as possible, but the goblins are growing impatient.”

“Why were you delaying it?” Harry asked trying to reign in his anger and embarrassment at both his role in his godfather’s death and that once again he was having information withheld from him.

“I wanted to make sure that after the reading, you could go and be amongst your friends and not have to return to your relatives. Sirius was also the last male of an old bloodline. There are usually arrangements that are made to prevent the end of a bloodline. I am also concerned that, given his own penchant for rebelling against authority Sirius may include several unusual provisions to his will. I am not privy to the arrangements he has made with his solicitor. Remus may have some knowledge, but I suspect that he too is completely in the dark.”

Harry took a moment to digest this new information. It would be in Sirius’s nature to use his will to “prank” someone or for that matter everyone. He was curious about what kind of arrangements would be enough to make Dumbledore concerned.

Doug Spinnet had finished taking Professor Snape’s statement and had directed him to the bathroom. Unusual magic emanating from the breakroom had interrupted their debriefing. The auror accompanied by the professor and Susan peered into the hallway. Doug instructed them to wait there and he moved down the hallway with his wand drawn. A quick look into the breakroom and he was very surprised to see an argument backed by significant magical discharge taking

place between the two greatest living heroes of the Wizarding world. He immediately noticed the quality of the silencing charm the headmaster had used. If not for that, Doug suspected that this argument could have been heard all the way back to the atrium. Wishing for a moment that he was a fly on the breakroom wall, but then cringing as a bolt of wild magic seared the wall next to him. He turned around and headed back to his charges.

"What is that idiot boy doing now?" Inquired the potion master.

"He and the headmaster are having a polite discussion. Now, if you don't mind let us finish your statements."

The professor's statement mirrored Harry's previous statement. There were no significant inconsistencies that immediately sounded any warning signals in the auror's mind. He dismissed Professor Snape and turned to Susan, who looked very nervous. His gut instincts told him that the story was too perfect. He decided to take a bit of a chance and do a little fishing.

"So, Susan are you going to stick with their prefabricated tale or are you going to tell me what really happened?" He said as Susan gasped.

"No. I mean yes! It pretty much happened just the way Harry said it did." She said desperately trying to recover her composure.

"And I was just named the new Minister of Magic." He said and suddenly realized his mistake as Susan staggered like she had just been punched. "Oh Merlin!" He thought. "Her aunt probably was going to be the next Minister. Way to go Dougie! You stupid git! Let's see you smoothtalk your way out of this."

Susan was already crying as he guided her back to one of the beds. "Listen. I am truly sorry. That came out before I really thought about it. I didn't mean to upset you. Why don't you sit here and relax for a moment? I will run an analysis charm on your three wands. That will take about five minutes. After that I will apologize again and we can talk some more."

He got up trying to recall all the advice he had ever received about dealing with crying women. Settling on his mother's tried and true recommendation of apologize, give space, come back and immediately apologize again before doing anything else. He walked back to the desk and examined Professor Snape's wand. His suspicion's about the story he was being told were confirmed the moment he discovered that a "clearing" charm had been run on the wand. Typically, a well performed Priori Incantem could recover the last ten to twenty spells cast from the wand." Doug was very good at forensics and could usually get around twenty spells. He was shocked when he only could read the last two – a body bind and an unusual cutting curse by the looks of his diagnostics. He moved on to Susan's wand which displayed the last fifteen spells, which showed a good mix of offensive and defensive magic all would have been violations of the Underage Usage Law except for the circumstances of this evening. Recording all that he then took out Harry's wand and ran the analysis charm. As he recorded the spells he tried to put himself into Harry's mind.

"Envenerate. Easy enough Snape was stunned by on of the Death Eaters. Coloris? Why would he use a garment transfiguration spell? Vanosisus. Vanishing some debris? Reducto. Alas poor Rudolphus, rest in peace. Animatus. Oh yeah he said that he charmed the curtains to hold him still. Lacero, Reducto, Stupefy, Protego, Lacero, Protego, Reducto, Impactus are all expected. A banishing spell preceded by a sticking charm – oh yeah the idiot with the throw pillow stuck to his head. Pyrus Impactus! Holy Merlin! How does a fifteen year old even know how to cast that? Who did he use that on?"

Doug reckoned that it had been about five minutes since he managed to traumatize the poor girl. It was time for the second apology and maybe a couple of answers to what really happened. Susan appeared to have regained her composure and was now eyeing him warily. Telling the teenager that he would be right back, he walked down the hall and went to his desk. From the bottom drawer he withdrew the small personal pensieve his parents had given him when he graduated auror training.

"Okay Susan. I have finished my diagnostics and let me apologize again for my thoughtless comments. My behavior was reprehensible

and I am ashamed of myself. Now my official report will read just like Mr. Potter's statement, but you and I both know that isn't really what happened, don't we? I would like to see what really transpired from your point of view. Afterwards, you take your memory back and we never have to talk about it again. I will even give you a Wizard's Oath if you want. Deal?"

Susan took her wand back from him and touched it to her temple. Concentrating and reaching out with her magic she withdrew the silvery substance from her memory. She put it into the bowl and stirred it. Doug bent over to draw himself into the memory and began to take in the details.

Less than five minutes later, he raised his head and looked at her. "Sweet Merlin! Potter drove him off! Why on earth would he omit that?"

Susan had been considering this as well for the whole time the auror was watching her memory. "If it became public knowledge, people would be demanding Harry challenge him to a bloody duel or something. I think Harry will eventually be able to beat him, but he isn't ready yet."

Doug's mind was still reeling with questions that he doubted he would ever get answered. Susan took this time to remove the memory from the pensieve and return it to its proper place. They sat quietly for another minute before conversation resumed.

"You should be proud of the way you fought. I know some fully trained wizards that would have crumbled. You would do well as an auror after you finish school."

"Not well enough to save Mum or Auntie." She said with more than a touch of bitterness.

Professor Snape left the washroom after he had regained his composure. The evening's events weighing heavily on his mind. The whelp had seriously injured the Dark Lord! It was true that his master had been exhausted with maintaining the anti-escape curses – so exhausted that he relinquished direct control of the Inferni partway through the battle to the potion's master. Then there was the matter

of the duel with Madame Bones, whose resistance had been surprisingly strong. By the time Potter had shown, his master had been ridiculously low in energy. He had little doubt that in an equal duel between the two, that the Dark Lord would quickly reduce the arrogant child to a mound of charred flesh. However, the Slytherin in him reminded Severus that the first rule of duels is that there is no such thing as an “equal” duel. Advantages exist in every situation. One need only recognize and seize the opportunities when they present themselves.

It was during this reflection, that Severus Snape came to understand how much of an opportunist the Potter brat had become. The boy's magical talent and athleticism were impressive, but not overwhelming. His mental aptitude certainly would not make his enemies quiver in fear. His penchant for emotional outbursts and uncontrolled rage were dangerous liabilities, which even the Slytherin students were able to exploit. Yet through it all, Potter had an almost unnatural ability to turn the tables on his foes. The professor did not doubt that his least favorite student was a person who quite literally could fall into a cart of manure and come up smelling like flowers. Now that he had intentionally killed another in combat, he would require further scrutiny. He might actually be able to threaten the Dark Lord. Even now, his master would have apparated to a safe house to self-medicate. It was not a matter of pride, but self-preservation. The rank and file could never and would never see how badly their leader had been injured. Severus himself could only catch the faintest glimpses of how grievously injured he had been after the battle at the Ministry. Though no real physical injuries existed, there had been a certain emptiness to his aura of power, that many of the old guard – had they not been in custody would have discerned. Severus knew from his conversation with his other master, that the Dark Lord had attempted to physically possess Potter and had been quite forcefully and painfully ejected. Physical possession was among the rarest and most costly obscure magics. It demands a tremendous amount of power coupled with precise control. Most would be simply content with using the imperius curse to achieve a similar result. Once again, Potter's ability to prevail in a situation where he had no business succeeding would baffle even the most critical observer. He is highly resistant to the imperius curse and oddly vulnerable to other forms of mental suggestion at the same time. Almost as if the raw emotions

were too much for an outsider to effectively control, but hampered his ability to Occlude his mind and erect all but the most primitive of mental defenses.

He continued to ponder the enigma that was The-Boy-Who-Lived as his steps carried him past the medical bay where they had been received towards the breakroom, where Potter had been previously throwing a tantrum. He could hear the Bones girl's wailing tears and it only served to annoy him further. She was an average student in his class – competent enough to avoid trouble, but lacking the talent or the drive to truly succeed at such a precise art. He had been surprised that the Master had brought him out into the field. Not that he lacked the skill, but his additional abilities normally required a supporting role. The Dark Lord currently was woefully undermanned and this evening's failure paid testimony to that fact. The newest generation of Death Eaters had suffered through the same pathetic basic combat instruction for the same period as the rest of the student body. The lack of capable spellcasters on both sides was glaringly evident. More of the Headmaster's machinations, no doubt. Snape clung to this nugget of truth in his mind. It was suddenly obvious that the Headmaster had been trying to limit the available pool of truly dangerous fighters to control the scope of the war. Perhaps this explained some of the more ridiculous hiring practices that Albus Dumbledore had engaged in over the past few years. By alternating useless fools like Quirell and Lockhart, whose greatest contributions had been to further spell damage research with somewhat competent instruction by the likes of Lupin and Crouch junior. The lemon drop obsessed maniac had managed to dilute the average Hogwarts graduates capabilities. For every capable student like Malfoy and Zabini, there were the likes of Crabbe and Goyle. Potter had shifted the balance slightly with his little secret club. The professor secretly wondered if the "golden child" had begun even subconsciously to understand the manipulations of the Headmaster and counter them. It would be giving the wretched brat far too much credit, but as tonight's events continued to unfold before him - he would not let his sheer hatred of the boy cloud any other useful observations, which could be very helpful to Severus Snape's ultimate ambitions.



Allowing himself a brief moment of entertainment, he pictured the unintended consequences of Dumbledore's meddling and the downhill spiral the Wizarding world could take. A hundred years from now, a new dark lord rises surrounding himself with warriors as skilled as Crabbe and Goyle. They would be fought back by legions resembling Hestia Jones and Daedulus Diggle. The Creevy brothers would best five Hundred years from now, a new dark lord with powers rivaling the joke that is McNair. Should that pathetic future come to pass, Severus secretly hoped his line would truly be dead and gone. The unusual expression on Professor Snape's face was perhaps the closest thing to a genuine smile that had crossed his visage in many years. Banishing it, he walked into the breakroom.

"Good evening Headmaster. I see your concerns about the boy's ever-increasing desire to charge into danger are based on shrewd deductions. Did you at the very least mention to your minders that you planned a rendezvous with a Dark Lord this evening?" He waited to see if the whelp would rise to the challenge.

Harry looked on the verge of a fit of epic proportions, but focused hard on the Headmaster's insistence on emotional control. He growled back his reply.

"So very nice to see you again professor. I am sorry about disposing of your mask in such a crude fashion. You probably just can't go into Madame Malkin's and order a replacement, now can you? I suppose we could spellotape Rudolphus's back together, but Peter and the rest would tease you something fierce."

"Insolent brat." It was less an insult and more a statement of fact.

"Could have let Dawlish arrest you now couldn't I?"

"Enough. Both of you! We have more important items to discuss. What were Voldemort's intentions this evening? You normally do not participate."

"He is running short of capable spellcasters at the moment. I have been pressed into service. I was not given the specific reasons for the attack, but I surmise that he did not wish for Madame Bones to become the next Minister of Magic."

“That makes sense. Amelia had a knack for problem solving. She would have been a thorn in his side. Now we must determine the best course of action with regards to the vacant ministry positions.”

“As for the girl, she would be the last of the Bones family. I suspect she would have been dominated and controlled for her money, properties and the hereditary votes of the Bones clan. I suspect this and whatever mission was assigned to Bellatrix were meant to derail attempts at placing a competent Minister in power.”

As the trio pondered this information, several owls arrived in the breakroom. Harry already knew that the parchments they carried were multiple warnings for the use of underage magic. Surprisingly, they did not detail all the spells performed. Something his friend Hermione Granger had mentioned once sprung to mind. It was the concept of magical saturation. The delicate and sensitive instruments the ministry used to plot magical emanations can be overwhelmed by sheer volume of spells. A quick reading of the parchments confirmed that Improper Use of Magic Office had detected his presence in an area of high magical saturation. He would need to meet with a representative of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to have his wand examined and justify the usage of spells. Fortunately, Harry had already done just that.

By this time, Auror Spinnett escorted Susan into the room. He returned Professor Snape's and Harry's wands. Harry could tell she had been crying. She was clasping her own stack of parchments courtesy of Mrs. Hopkirk. She stood near Harry, looking sad and uncomfortable. He knew that she could use a gesture of comfort. He thought of his last few days at school, which was mostly a blur. The one thing that stood out was Luna Lovegood placing a hand on his shoulder and giving him a friendly smile. She never said anything and that was exactly what he needed.

Summoning a bit of his courage, Harry reached out with his left arm and touched her shoulder. He gave a firm squeeze and met her eyes. They were still puffy from the tears, but he detected a hint of surprise in them as well. He gave her a slight nod of his head and a brief smile. He could feel her trembling and opted to give her a bit more encouragement.

“You are strong Susan. You’ll get through this.” He said to her. She acknowledged him by taking her left hand across her body and placing it over top of his hand, which still rested on her shoulder. He said nothing further, unsure of what else he could say.

Watch Captain Anders entered the room. He held his hand expectantly towards Susan and Harry. “Well, give me those notices. I will handle them. Mr. Potter it seems you are in a bit of trouble for creating an illegal portkey. I have prepared a class 1 citation it carries with it a fine of 300 galleons. We will deduct that amount from the reward for the capture of Rudolphus Lestrage. Give both of these forms to the clerk at the front desk on your way out of the building. He will get your vault number from you and transfer the 700 remaining galleons into your account. I recommend that you pick up the paperwork to apply for a portkey creation license. I can let you go with a fine and no permanent damage to your record for a first offense, but a second offense would mean an arrest.”

They handed over the parchments and the two aurors left the room. Susan had never really interacted with the legendary headmaster of Hogwart’s. He was looking at her now with only sadness and remorse in his eyes.

“Ms. Bones allow me to express my condolences on your loss. I remember your mother was a fine young lady and your aunt was a most powerful witch.”

“Thank you sir.” She managed to choke out.

“Unfortunately, Voldemort is after you and we will need to take certain precautions for your safety. Harry you can disregard our arrangements. We will move straight to Headquarters. I will have your belongings retrieved from your relatives. We will also arrange for Ms. Bones’s belongings to be brought there as well.”

“We – I have a house elf,” Susan said weakly. “She can gather my things.”

“Very well.”

“Trixie!” Susan said causing a small house elf to appear.

"Mistress Susan! So worried was poor Trixie!" The little creature was clinging to Susan's leg.

"Please return to the house and pack my things. I will also need my aunt's pensieve and her private collection of books."

"Yes! Mistress Susan! Right away!" The house elf disappeared.

"That is all I need sir. I am ready to leave."

"We will need to stop by the clerk's desk sir." Harry said quietly.

"Yes of course."

When Harry reached the front desk, he presented the very surprised clerk the paperwork that Watch Captain Anders had presented earlier. The clerk was in a mild state of shock as both Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore arrived at his desk in the middle of the night. Harry signed the paperwork and collected an application for portkey creation license. The two professors and Susan had already walked out into the night air as Harry was concluding his business.

"Sir, could I impose upon you?" Harry asked.

"Certainly! What can I do for you?"

"May I borrow a bit of parchment? I was hoping to jot a quick note to a friend and have you send it with an owl?"

"Of course!" The night clerk said offering him sheet of parchment, an envelope and a quill.

On the outside of the envelope he wrote, "Neville Longbottom. Longbottom Estate."

Neville,

This is just a quick note. I wanted to tell you rather than have you see it in the Prophet. Last night, I was at Susan's. Rudolphus Lestrangle died by my hand. Revenge will not bring us back our loved ones, but

maybe we will rest a bit easier tonight. Thank you for all your help at the Department of Mysteries and for your friendship.

Your friend

Harry Potter

## Chapter 4 Every Teenaged Witches Fantasy

Susan stepped out of the ministry into the cool night air. She stayed close to the headmaster, still unsure of what to do about Severus Snape. Harry was inside still collecting paperwork and dealing with his fine/reward. The evening had been an emotional rollercoaster for her and right now she seemed to be at a lowpoint. She felt emotionally drained after her collapse during her interview. Thankfully, the auror had taken a Wizard's Oath, so she did not feel that she had betrayed Harry's trust. She justified her actions by reasoning that the more people that know what a shady character Professor Snape is the better.

Five minutes later Harry stepped out clutching a stack of papers. He was still in his sweatpants, although the mediwizard had cleaned the grime and mended the tears from the battle. He had also been given an ill-fitting robe with DMLE emblazoned on the back. The headmaster carefully regarded his student.

"I am all finished."

"Were there any other problems Harry?"

"No sir. The clerk was even kind enough to let me use an owl to send a message."

"Who did you owl?"

"Neville."

"I must ask why?"

"After what Lestrage did to his parents, I figured he should be told. I would have like to done it in person, but that's not practical. Maybe, I will be able to floo call him when we get to our destination."

"Perhaps, but let us at least wait until tomorrow. If you and Ms. Bones will grasp this portkey it will take you our destination. Ms. Bones, you will need to memorize the information on this piece of parchment." He said holding out a copy of yesterday's Daily Prophet and a folded scrap of parchment. Susan and Harry both felt the pull of the portkey

and found they were now on the sidewalk in a residential neighborhood standing between a house marked #11 and another marked #13. They heard a faint pop. Susan spun to look at the new arrival and relaxed seeing it was only the headmaster. Out of the corner of her eye, she noted that not only had Harry also turned, but also he had his wand out and had dropped into a defensive crouch.

“Note to self,” she thought. “Don’t ever try sneaking up on Harry.”

“Sorry sir,” Harry said returning his wand into the borrowed robes. “Constant vigilance and all that.”

“Indeed. Alastor will be pleased. Now the house has been inaccessible since the unfortunate death of Mr. Black. He could have only left it to one of four individuals, Remus, you, Ms. Tonks or myself. I have already eliminated the other three, so it must be you. To take possession, you must place your hand on the door and say ‘I am Harry James Potter. I claim this house in the name of Sirius Orion Black.’”

Susan had looked at the piece of paper that informed her there was a secret house here and suddenly the house sprang into existence before her. She was still registering what the headmaster had said. The house belonged to the notorious murderer Sirius Black. The last remaining vestiges of her once normal and safe life vanished. Where but a few hours ago the things that mattered most were OWL results, evening tea and talking about boys with Hannah. In its place now were hiding in the home of a murderer, teachers trying to kidnap her, headmasters that did not seem surprised and moments of absolute terror, which she hoped one day she would be able to forget.

“I, Harry James Potter, claim this house in the name of Sirius Orion Black.”

Susan swore she heard his voice hitch when he said the other man’s name. Understandable, she reasoned. Black had been trying to kill Harry after all. She saw the door glow momentarily and then open. Harry entered followed by Susan and then Dumbledore. The space inside was definitely not open and inviting. It looked like someplace Pansy Parkinson would like.

“Where is Kreacher?”

“Phineas was able to venture through the portraits. He has been lying at the base of Mrs. Black’s painting for several days. He is either dead or catatonic. We shall see momentarily.”

Sure enough as they entered the kitchen, Susan saw the body of a withered looking house elf and smelled the stench of decay. Covering her mouth she ran to the sink and emptied the contents of her stomach. Harry came over to comfort her, while Dumbledore verified that Kreacher was truly gone and vanished the body. At the sound of Susan’s retching, the portrait the dead elf had been laying under came to life and started screaming obscenities at them. Dumbledore sighed and cast a powerful silencing charm that muted her. He next used his magic to freshen the air. This helped Susan immensely. Harry was behaving in time-honored tradition by keeping her hair out of her face and running the tap to get rid of the vomit.

After purging herself, she chanced a look at Harry. He patted her back reassuringly and she saw genuine concern in his green eyes. Every teen witch in Britain and probably several other countries dreamt of spending quality time with Harry Potter. Even Susan herself had indulged in a few daydreams. Somehow, holding her hair out of the way while she vomited had never made it into those fantasies. True he was being no less noble or gallant than she imagined. Unfortunately, Susan really didn’t feel that he was seeing her best side right now. She felt utterly humiliated.

“It’s okay Susan. The smell kind of got to me as well. You’ve had a rough night and a lot to take in.”

“I am sorry about your elf.”

“Don’t be! He is partially to blame for my godfather’s death!” This confused Susan even more, but strangely she was getting used to it. She was trying not to focus too hard. Focusing leads to concentration and that would lead her to start thinking about the horrors of tonight, which she was determined to avoid. Later, she promised herself, when no one else could see – she would confront her loss.



“Okay Harry. I don’t know what to say. I uh well I should start by thanking you for saving my life. I guess you can add my name to the list of people who owe you a life debt.” She said struggling to regain her composure. “How did you know to come?”

He tapped the famous scar on his forehead. “Sometimes, I can see what he is doing through this. We are getting better at blocking each other out, but he let his defenses slip during the battle.”

“Oh.” Was the only reply Susan could make while digesting that nugget of information. Inside she was thinking, “What the hell can you say to that? Good show Harry! Tune in to the Dark Lord hour this week on Wizarding Wireless.” She wondered how much he had seen and the pain it must cause him.

Coming to her senses she continued, “And the portkey Harry? Did you really make it wandlessly?”

“Yeah. I am still a little confused about that though.”

“Perhaps I can offer a theory.” The headmaster sat at the table. “There are many ways to learn magic. Traditionally, you read books and then find opportunities to practice until you can perfect the spell. Your friend Ms. Granger is a prime example of how much can be achieved with such diligence. Every so often, a person comes along who has an instinctive grasp on magic. I suspect you are such a person Harry. You have already experienced several portkeys. You know what the around one feels like. Coming out of your vision and feeling the need to reach the Bones residence, you tapped into your magic and instinctively created your first portkey. I will have someone start working with you on apparation. You will start doing several side-alongs before you are given any instruction. If my theory is correct, your body will feel how the magical field is manipulated and this should significantly reduce the amount of time required for you to master this skill. I may also have Minerva start helping you to determine if you can indeed become an Animagus. Once you have discovered your form, we may be able to jump start the process by having you transfigured into that form repeatedly. Again, should my suspicions be correct, you would acquire the skill in no time at all.”

“Have you ever known someone else that learned magic that way?” Harry asked interested in the olive branch that his mentor was offering. Ironically, that may have also explained how with no previous training, he had cast crucio on Bellatrix Lestrange after much exposure to the curse.

“Only myself in recent history. There were several other suspected instances. All of whom became legendary witches and wizards.”

“So that means you are an animagus? What is your form?” Susan asked wanting to be a part of the conversation.

“A goat - not terribly useful except for getting a family member into trouble and looking inconspicuous on a farm. I haven’t really found the need to transform in well over a decade. However, any ability has its uses. Before you are so quick to dismiss the goat, it should be know that I have a keen sense of balance as a result. Much like young Nymphadora, I was dreadfully clumsy in my youth and the transformation made a significant change, which carried over to my natural form.”

Upon disclosure of this new information, several stories from previous years made sense. Something about his brother getting into trouble over goats, Professor Flitwick’s offhanded crack about “the barmy old goat” and a Christmas present Harry had seen Hagrid give to the headmaster – a block of Goat’s cheese. For the first time all evening, Harry saw a hint of the missing twinkle in Dumbledore’s eyes.

“If I can learn it, I would be happy to sir. Like you said earlier, we need all the advantages we can get.”

“Yes. Perhaps if Ms. Bones could summon her house elf. Otherwise, it will not be able to enter the premises. I will also arrange for your friend Dobby to come by to help you get things in order. He has been able to access the site to feed Buckbeak. Bill Weasley will be by tomorrow to examine and reinforce the wards. I have already given them a cursory examination and they seem fine for the moment. As soon as I can arrange it, you will have at least one guard here around the clock and the rest of the Weasleys will most likely be moved here. Your friend Ms. Granger is out of the country for five more days. I do

require your formal permission to continue using your home as my headquarters.”

“Of course sir, but please restrict your people to the first two floors. I do want some sense of freedom.” Harry couldn’t resist placing a condition on the usage. He did not really care if the Order members came upstairs or not; he merely wanted to remind Dumbledore that things were not okay between the two of them right now.

“Understood.” Apparently Harry’s message had been received loud and clear. “I must be going now. You have both had a very difficult night. Experiencing death firsthand is never pleasant. Should you wish to talk to someone, perhaps your head of house it can be arranged. I would caution you to not develop such a callous attitude towards killing. It is a path one does not wish to travel.”

As the headmaster stood to leave, Harry replied with a certain sense of coldness. “Sir, you once said that death was just the next great adventure. I don’t think I will lose much sleep over punching Rudolphus’s ticket. I tried to rationalize that I didn’t kill Quirell, because he was already possessed and in the chamber that really wasn’t Voldemort’s sixteen-year-old self. Looking back now, I don’t see the difference between what I did then and what I did tonight. I have been a killer since my first year and looking ahead I know it will happen again.”

“You are correct in a sense Harry. The difference between having to kill and wanting to kill is your conscience. Goodnight.” With that the headmaster disappeared leaving the two of them alone.

Susan watched the exchange between her classmate and headmaster in shock. No one had ever really heard the truth of what happened to their first year Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor. Rumors had been traded like chocolate frog cards. Most had heard bits and pieces of the Chamber of Secrets, but outside of Harry’s close friends, Susan doubted that anyone had heard the full story. The entire student body assumed that Harry had a grandchild like relationship with the headmaster. That may have once been the case, but for the moment they alternated between casual acceptance to barely disguised anger in their comments. Susan decided that if she

was to spend much more time in “Harry’s World”, that she must learn the dynamics of Harry’s relationships with other people. It was already becoming a confusing blur. Perhaps when Hermione gets here she will be able to explain things. She was in her Ancient Runes class and they had spent some time together working on projects. They weren’t exactly friends, but they could at least exchange smalltalk on occasions. Maybe she could also approach the young Weasley girl, who was either a fourth or fifth year. She would actually have to make friends with her and learn her first name. Otherwise it would be rude. They had only ever met at DA meetings and the number of words spoken between the two of them could likely be counted on one hand.

Susan concentrated and focused on her house elf. A minute later she was rewarded by a faint pop and Trixie had arrived. She had two trunks and her aunt’s pensieve. One trunk contained clothes and the second trunk contained books. Trixie asked if there was a room to store valuables from the damaged house. Harry told the small elf to use one of the unoccupied bedrooms and to seal it so only her and Susan could access it.

“Miss Susan in a hard spot to get to. Trixie had to work real hard to get by wizard magic. Trixie hope she be safe here.”

“I do to.” Susan said quietly.

Harry handed her a butterbeer from the chillbox. She gratefully accepted. She toyed with the idea of asking for something with a bit more kick to it, but dismissed it. Harry had already seen her vomiting. He probably would be even less impressed if she followed her earlier performance by trying to get drunk. She paused her train of thought for a moment. “Why do I suddenly care so much about what Harry thinks of me?”

“Trixie will go prepare a room for Miss Susan and her friend.” The house elf said cheerfully levitating the trunks into the air.

“On the third floor is a pair of bedrooms. I usually share one with Ron and the other Ginny and Hermione use.” Harry told the elf.

Ginny – that was her name! Susan filed that tidbit of information away. “Harry, for tonight I don’t mind sharing a bedroom. I really don’t want to be alone.”

“Um, well, okay if that is what you want.” Harry looked somewhat uncomfortable.

“Relax Mr. Potter. I am sure you are a perfect gentleman.” Susan said enjoying his awkwardness. “This doesn’t mean we have to go to Madame Pudifoot’s or anything.”

A little fire came back into Harry’s eyes. “I suppose the entire school heard about my so called date there?”

“Pretty much. I was actually there with Ernie, Hannah and Justin. Saw most of it with my own two eyes. Damn that girl can cry, but yeah it was all over the Hogwart’s gossip network by the end of the day.”

“You were there with Ernie?” Harry asked skeptically.

“Hey, leave my errors in judgement out of this!”

“Seriously, what did you see in him?”

“Well, if you must know, Ernie is very confident. He’s a very nice guy. He is rather good at Transfiguration.”

“So why aren’t you two still dating?”

“Because, he is too confident. A bit too arrogant and knows he is really good at Transfiguration.” She said flashing a genuine smile for the first time in several hours, but what felt like days. Harry chuckled in return.

“I look back and wonder what I could have done different with Cho and the best thing I came up with was that I shouldn’t have gone on the date in the first place.”

“You are probably right. I don’t think you two could have made it work anyway.”

“Why not?” Harry replied trying but failing to sound offended.

“She was too needy and you obviously had more important things going on. I really don’t know Cho personally, but from what I see she is ultra-competitive and she craves positive reinforcements. The kind of person who always needs to be told that she is smart, pretty or good at quidditch. She is very high maintenance. You seem to want space, peace and quiet. So from the outside, it looked like a disaster from the get go. Plus, she is way too jealous. She was certain you and Hermione had a thing, but she definitely has a thing for Ron. By the way do you have a day in the Ron/Hermione dating pool?”

“Seamus tried to get me into it, but as best friend to both of them I have to excuse myself. It just wouldn’t be right. What day did you pick?”

“I got August 28th. I figure just before school, Ron will get up the nerve. I tried to get your birthday, but that, September 1st and Hermione’s birthday were the first ones taken. The pot is over 100 galleons!”

“I try to avoid those silly betting pools. Merlin knows what they bet about me!”

“Actually there are quite a few. There is one on the number of times you will catch the snitch next season, another is the number of times you end up in the hospital wing and the two most popular are number of points Professor Slimeball will take from you in potions for the year and, of course the next girlfriend pool.”

“The next girlfriend pool? Do I even want to know?” He said shaking his head.

“Probably not.”

“I am going to regret this, but how does that one work?”

“Well you are given odds based on the girl you pick?”

“Whose got the best odds?”

“Cho and Hermoine are even money. Most people think there will be reconciliation with Cho or that Ron and Hermoine have a big blowup and she runs to you. Ron’s sister has pretty good odds as well. Everyone sees the way she used to stare at you. Pavarti gets some bets because of the Yule ball.” Susan was actually really enjoying the flush on his cheeks.

“So who did you put your money on?”

“Hannah.”

“But she is dating Justin. Even I know that.”

“Yeah. We did it as a joke. I bet on her and she bet on me. We got the standard same year different house odds. Twenty-five to one.”

“Who is the long shot?”

“Pansy. One Hundred and fifty to one. You hate her guts, she is Draco’s little hussy and she looks like a pug. Even Millie Bulstrode has better odds. She at least has a nice disposition.”

“Really. I have never talked to her.”

“Well that’s not surprising given the way your two houses are always at each other’s throats, but Millie is quite good at Ancient Runes. Most people assume that she is an idiot because of her looks, but I assure you she is actually very smart.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

“Well you asked? But don’t let anyone know I told you. I would hate it if everyone thought that I ruined their fun when you suddenly fall head over heels for Hannah.”

“Not likely. Remind me to hex Seamus when we get back. In fact remind me on a weekly basis to hex him.”

They laughed and finished their drinks. Susan’s elf came back downstairs and informed them that the bedroom had been cleaned and was ready for them. Harry asked the elf politely if she would feed

the hippogriff in the attic. Trixie readily agreed and told them that she would have breakfast prepared for them in the morning. Susan just added it to the growing list of unusual things she was encountering. As they started up the steps, she decided to ask him about it.

“Do you really have a hippogriff in the attic?”

“Yeah. Remember Buckbeak from third year? Attacked Malfoy because, he was too much of an idiot to approach it correctly.”

“Really. I heard that the Ministry ordered it be executed.”

“They did. We rescued it. Story for another time though.”

“Oh. I am just amazed that you take all this in stride. How do you cope?”

“There’s an old Chinese curse – May you live in interesting times. I am learning to accept it rather than fight it. Here we are. The loo is just around the corner. If you want, I will take you up to meet Buckbeak tomorrow. I think you two will get along just fine.”

“Thanks. If its okay with you, tomorrow I would like to use my aunt’s – um well I guess use my pensieve. I want to see your adventures. Since that bastard is after me, I want to know what I am up against. Will you show me?” She looked him straight in the eyes and allowed him to glimpse the determination there.

Harry thought for a moment. She was asking for some pretty personal information. Things he had rarely shared with anyone, much less someone he barely knew. He knew deep down that she deserved it as much as anyone else.

“Okay. I will show you what I can. There may be some things that I don’t want to show. I am still dealing with them, but we can cross that bridge when we get to it. Fair enough?”

She smiled and gave him a hug. “Thank you.” She choked out and broke away to the bathroom. Harry stood there for a moment lost in thought. Susan’s hug was soft and gentle. It was quite unlike the hugs from Hermione and the Weasley women. They would normally



attempt to crush and smother him. As he walked into the room and sat on his bed, he hoped that he would receive more soft and gentle hugs. He drifted off to sleep before Susan had returned.

Susan spent twenty minutes in the bathroom trying to get her composure back. She nearly lost it when she realized what Harry had just agreed to. She had read the article in the Quibbler. She knew that Harry would show her Cedric Diggory's death and Voldemort's rebirth. He might even show her the truth behind the Basilisk from their second year as well as the events at the Department of Mysteries. Susan knew how much Harry valued his privacy. She cursed herself for practically demanding that she be allowed to see the terrible events in his life. How could she be that rude? What kind of horrible person would do such a thing? Having been denied their full release before; her tears arrived with a vengeance. For ten straight minutes she sat on the edge of the bathtub and wallowed in her misery. She remembered how upset she had been in her third year when her first boyfriend had broken up with her. She recalled how her mother sat with her on her bed and let Susan sob on her shoulder reassuring her that the world would not end over some fourth year Ravenclaw. Feelings of pettiness and guilt racked her body as she muffled her sobs. She was certain that everyone would express their condolences about her aunt and say what a wonderful person she had been. What made her angry and frustrated was the knowledge that her mother would be hardly mentioned at all – almost as an afterthought. She continued crying until she had no tears left.

Making herself as presentable as she could possibly be, she left the bathroom and returned to the bedroom. Trixie had left a nightshirt and dressing gown out on the bed with the hideous Chudley Cannon's logo on the bedspread. She went ahead and extinguished the light. Harry was already sound asleep. Doubting that he would awaken and fearful that if she returned to the bathroom it would trigger another breakdown, she changed there in the darkness. Thankfully, Harry did not stir. Susan slid under the comforter and bundled herself up into a fetal position. She was exhausted, but could not sleep. She wished the headmaster had sent back some sleeping draught. It was probably going to be a long night.

From the other side of the room, she heard a low moaning begin. In the minimal light from the window, Susan saw Harry begin to thrash about on his bed.

“Sirius ... No! Sirius! I am so sorry! Cedric get out of here! Save yourself! Run! No don’t die! My fault.”

Susan heard the anguish as his cries repeated themselves. In a perfect world, she would get up take him in her arms and hold him to drive the pain away. This however was far from a perfect world. She found new moisture clouding her eyes as she watched the so-called hero of the wizarding world struggle against his inner demons. Curling even tighter into her fetal position. She grabbed the other pillow and put it over her head to muffle the noises and prayed that sleep would finally claim her. While she waited for sleep to eventually come, Susan thought of the irony of the Teen Witch Weekly article about the fantasy date with Harry Potter. One of the comments was how one of the top fantasies was spending the night in Harry’s bedroom.

The last thought on her mind before sleep finally took her was, “Oh yes definitely every teen witches fantasy.”

Many miles away from where Susan desperately tried to sleep. A figure sat on the edge of the bed smearing a burn salve on his chest and left arm. Veela cream was an impressive remedy. Made even more potent when mixed with the blood of the Veela that mixed the cream. Few healers willingly performed that step. Fortunately, Lord Voldemort was quite persuasive. Strategically, tonight was a draw. Amelia Bones was dead and she was by far the most impressive of the ministers that could possibly be elevated as an interim solution. He still held out hope that Rudolphus and Severus were able to complete the mission and capture the Bones heiress, but a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach told him to expect defeat. He had learned long ago to trust that gut instinct. Again, he cursed himself for overextending his assets. Had he taken Bella or Peter along as well, they could have shouldered more of the magical load and he would have been stronger and not exhausted when Dumbledore’s whelp arrived. The sting of Potter’s curse still reverberated through him.

The Dark Lord pondered the champion of the light and his nemesis. The boy had not been able to face him in the Department of Mysteries. Dumbledore's formidable animation skills had protected him, while Potter looked broken and defeated. This time however, the boy rushed headlong and by himself into battle. His appearance had certainly not been expected. The element of surprise allowed the boy to land that foul curse. Bones's "Devastator" held far more power, but it was still impressive. Popping the stopper on a third restorative draught, he grimaced from both the foul tasting fluid and his continued failure against a boy wizard, not even of age yet. Voldemort did not rise to his position by continuously underestimating the opposition. Quite the opposite – in the years that preceded his rise to power it was he who was usually underestimated. Those fools who sat on their thrones and trusted their lackeys, while they dreamed of being Grindelwald's successor. He had even played the lackey role on two occasions ingratiating himself into both a Dark Witch and Wizard's inner circle only to betray them. The Lady Arrean died with her three top lieutenants watching the sunset from her villa in Nice. Gasping for air that would not come as the poison he tainted their dinners with closed their airways. She frantically applied the bubblehead charm hoping it would save her. The foul hag's final thrashings were the basis for his serpent patronus, which protects him during the negotiation with the dementors.

The Dark Lord Christobal died in a much more straightforward manner. Voldemort broke him physically. He still recalled the battle as if it were yesterday. Walking into the room after a particularly brutal battle to deliver his report, Voldemort was immediately placed under crucio by one of the two bodyguards. The burly Norwegian named Sven held him under the pain curse while Yuri Christobal lamented the loss of his idiot nephew Palus during the battle. He was only one of three soldiers lost that day compared to the five dozen workers the Turkish ministry lost as an entire ministry building was destroyed. The stupid braggart walked down the middle of the street as if the sight of a Christobal would somehow shield him from the curses of the desperate and dying inside the crumbling inferno. No less than three blasting curses, a bone breaker and two rather well performed piercers perforated his carcass. Palus Christobal was dead before his body ever hit the pavement. Voldemort however had moved the rest of his soldiers up under disillusionment and obscuring charms. At his

side a promising young man just graduated from Durmstrang, named Antonin Dolohov.

A quick signal to Dolohov and his team concentrated blasting curses against the side of the building seeking the load bearing columns that maintained the structure. The second group led by a raven hair witch name Misha Perez provided covering fire and maintained the anti-apparation wards. She flashed him a wicked smile as the continuous barrage of spells began to take its toll on the building. The workers inside the structure must have realized at some point that Christobal's forces were not going to storm the building. A few of the made a brave attempt to escape most dying on the steps cut down in a withering display of firepower from Misha's team. Two more ministry workers attempted to use brooms from the upper windows. Voldemort used the same jinx that he had the fool Quirell later attempt on Harry Potter. One managed to escape beyond the range, while the other clung to his bucking broom for nearly twenty seconds before his body fell six stories making a rather satisfying noise on impact.

"Hurry Anton! Before more of them realize what is happening. With that Voldemort concentrated his abilities on assisting the first unit with collapsing the building. Less than one minute later, there were telltale signs of the buildings collapse. The five-story building started making a rumbling noise and then moments later gave way. Voldemort covered his mouth to prevent inhaling the dust cloud. He quickly signaled his fighters forward to search for and eliminate the survivors. Seeing no immediate threat, he made his way to his second in command. The raven-haired beauty engaged him in a hushed conversation.

"Misha," he said struggling not to cough. "Who is injured and how badly?"

"Fliess is dead and Messner soon will be. The rest have minor injuries. I take it you saw what happened to Palus?"

"Yes. Better that his stupidity dies here, then have him breed and produce more useless offspring! Saved me the trouble of killing him myself."

"You know the old man will not see it that way. He will have a reckoning."

"There will be a reckoning this day, but it shall be mine. All of us would be dead if we followed the original plan. Storm a ministry building in broad bloody daylight. How very original."

"You know where my loyalties lie, Tom." Anyone else would suffer a heinous curse calling him by his muggle name. Misha was the exception. They wore no masks, no airs or illusions between the two of them. There was only primal lust and unchecked ambition. "Anton and I will cover the hallway. You will have to eliminate the old man and his two pets."

"I have seen the way he handles what he considers failure. I will have prepared myself. The potion I have prepared will fortify me against the pain curse. I will suffer, but the moment it is lifted, I will be able to attack. It will be sudden and viscous. There will be one less pretender calling himself a 'Dark Lord' this day."

"Fight well, my true liege."

Misha's parting words were branded across his mind as he contorted in pain from Sven's curse. Ranier, the second bodyguard did not even have his wand drawn. This was expected. Christobal's bodyguards had become complacent. Voldemort's knowledge of this fact was part of the inspiration for his plan.

After a minute, Sven released the curse. He walked forward arrogantly and lifted Voldemort up by the back of his neck. The pain precursor potion was already allowing him to see past the haze of agony through which he had just been subjected. Sven felt his victim struggle for balance and lean into him. His survival instincts were seconds to slow as he felt the tip of a wand thump against his breastbone.

"Reducto!" Voldemort yelled channeling his power into the blasting curse blowing an eight in wide hole through his tormentor's chest. The curse finished Sven and still had enough power to injure Ranier's leg. The second bodyguard fell off the elevated dais screaming in agony. Yuri Christobal overcame his shock and rose to his feet

drawing his wand. Voldemort used the shell of the dead Norwegian to shield himself. He stuck his wand and hand clear through the hole in Sven's body ignoring the gore and cast the killing curse at the prone form of Ranier. The sickly green light enveloped the careless man, who would never rise again.

"You dare! Lacero!"

Voldemort shoved Sven's lifeless body in the path of Christobal's cutting curse. Returning fire with one of his favorites – "Vlad's impaler". The curse was two spells wrapped in one. The first a piercing curse followed by a pain curse that sent a wave of pure agony through the victim's body.

Christobal screamed in agony as the curse winged him on his right arm. The man was a hulking brute, who reminded Voldemort of Horace Slughorn. Once upon a time, Yuri Christobal had been a giant of a man, but he had allowed his impressive physique to fall into disarray. The pretender sent a killing curse in answer, but it was poorly aimed and posed no real threat. Sounds of battle could be heard coming from the hallway. Misha and Anton were a class above the rest of Christobal's troops. He had no concerns, as he knew they would protect his backside. Voldemort felt the impact of a blasting curse, which was muted by the protective vest he wore. In return he slammed a bone crusher which ruined Christobal's hip. The man howled in agony as he fell in a heap. Shielding himself from the feeble return fire, Voldemort cast the disarming curse painfully separating the man from his wand.

"Now before you die, you shall suffer. Crucio!"

In retrospect, Voldemort would have liked to spend the next several hours or days tormenting Yuri Christobal, but the practical side won out as the sounds of battle continued from the outer hallways. He released the pain curse and watched as the broken body struggled to reach his wand. The future Dark Lord gathered his energy at his wand tip and released the killing curse, ending the reign of the "Butcher of Istanbul". Next, he performed a cutting curse to sever the man's head and a simple levitation spell.

Exiting the room into the great hall, he floated the head next to him smiling. Misha and Anton smiled at him as the spellfire in the great hall came to a halt.

“The Butcher is gone! Those who would follow me stay and reap the rewards. Those who will not leave now or die! There will be no second offer. Yuri offers no objections. Do you?” He said making the severed head nod in agreement.

Voldemort's meditation ended on that fond memory. It was a milestone on his rise to power. He gained many followers and much wealth that day. Sometimes, when he was deep in thought, the Darkest Wizard in recent history wondered if it was not so much about the end result of immortality, but the adrenaline fueled journey to get him there. A flick of his wand started a bath and he opened a jar full of medicinal herbs. He would soak for a time before returning to his remaining troops. They would not know the weakness he felt now. He vowed not to repeat Christobal's arrogance and complacency. There would be no surprise from within, not even Severus.

In a moment of reminiscing, he actually missed Misha. She would often share his bath with him. In truth though, he missed her counsel more than her physical presence. Misha had made no effort to hide her disgust at the physical transformations, he had undertaken. They had not shared a bed in the last five years of her life, but her advice and skill were invaluable. As he lowered himself into the bath, he recalled the final moments of the witch who had been the closest thing to a friend he would ever know.

It was June 27th, 1977. The day became known as the Portsmouth Bloodbath. It had started as a simple muggle-killing raid, but escalated as the ministry brought a sizable force of aurors and trainees into the field. His troops were high on adrenaline and spoiling for a fight. It became one of the bloodiest days of his first rise.

He finished disposing of a pair of fools, who dared to challenge him. A smile crossed his lips as he took in the carnage. It was magnificent! Misha stood despite her injuries, streaks of gray had invaded her raven tresses. A triumphant look of victory as she levitated a

damaged muggle motorcycle and repeatedly crushed Alastor Moody's leg. The old auror, who had been quite the thorn in his side was screaming in agony and clutching his ruined eye.

Misha tossed the muggle vehicle aside and towered over the doomed man. "So ends the great Moody. Hero to the end."

She lowered her wand and started her killing curse. As she did, she was bathed in a pale lavender light. There was a sickly crack as her neck suddenly bent to an awkward angle. Her eyes still held that look of triumph even as the light faded from them. She fell to the ground revealing her killer. He was a young man, probably still in the trainee program. He had a square jaw line and a muscular build.

"Accio Moody!" He gestured his wand still meeting Voldemort's gaze filled with defiance.

Voldemort fired a killing curse, but the young woman next to the auror levitated the same motorcycle Misha had been using as a club into the curse's path causing an explosion. The smoke obscured his enemies for a moment and the man used it to his advantage hitting Voldemort in his leg with a piercer.

"Frank. Portkey! Now!" Seconds later the trio disappeared before the smoke cleared. It was the first, but not the last time Lord Voldemort would encounter Frank and Alice Longbottom.



## Chapter 5 – The Fine Art of Negotiation

Bellatrix Lestrange was not pleased. This much could be easily guessed by the way that she walked up the sidewalk to Number 23 Riverwalk Lane. Her dress robes were immaculate. Her hair had been styled to frame her oval face and full lips. Makeup had been applied with great care and precision. Truth be told, it had been well over fifteen years since she had been “dressed to the nines”. The overall makeover had the desired effect on the numerous males she had encountered this evening, none aside from her escorts ever suspecting that the stunning beauty in her mid-thirties they were ogling was actually the most wanted witch in Wizarding Britain.

She was annoyed at having to be at this residence this evening. The two men escorting her were more concerned that the woman they were with would harm them than the possibility of confronting any magical law enforcement. They shifted uncomfortably in her presence. The older of the two knowing full well, that Bellatrix would rather be killing someone right now and with the least amount of provocation would relish the opportunity to take her frustrations out on some poor hapless soul.

Bellatrix thought back to the moment that she was given her assignment. She had been furious. Had there been a prisoner or other expendable, she could have killed on the spot.

“Milord, please reconsider. I should be at your side. Am I not your most faithful servant?” She pleaded with Voldemort. “At least switch me with Peter and let me lead that mission.”

“Dear Bella,” Her master started. “Peter is ill suited for a diplomatic mission such as this. He lacks the polite society skills that you were raised with and he is rather loathsome to look upon. I know how much you enjoy combat, but there are many types of combat. This is but a different battle, but one that must be fought and won just the same. There are two overwhelming forces in the cosmos – Power and Control. If you have enough Power, you simply take Control. If you have enough Control, the Power becomes yours for the taking.”

She knew he was right. She also knew that the Dark Lord would only endure so much questioning, even from her. She also suspected from

his reply that he was actually enjoying himself at her expense. Narcissa was the high society type. Her sister was the ballroom debutante, Bella was more the back alley and bedroom type.

“Ring the bell, you moron.” She berated the younger man, who visibly flinched.

A moment later, the door opened to reveal a young woman with curly strawberry blonde hair. Bella had been briefed on the soon to be seventh year Ravenclaw. The young lady was dressed well and smiled warmly. It was obvious that she had no real idea of the identity of the person she was addressing.

“Good evening. Welcome to the Edgecombe household. My name is Marietta. I will be your hostess for this evening. Father has asked me to take you to the parlor, where he will join us for refreshments while you discuss your business arrangements.” Her manners were flawless and smacked of a proper upbringing for a pureblooded woman.

Marietta led them down the hallway to the parlor. She was very nervous at having to host this party. Her family had fallen on hard times. Her mother was in prison, charged with gross abuse of power. She had authorized widespread and highly illegal floor monitoring under the Fudge administration. As one of his strongest supporters, Madame Edgecombe’s fall from power was fast, brutal and complete. Technically, her father had not been sacked from his position at the ministry. He was simply put on unpaid leave indefinitely pending the outcome of the investigation. Gringotts had frozen the family vaults at the request of the DMLE to determine the extent of financial wrongdoings in the scandal. The only liquid assets left for her family to survive on resided in Marietta’s trust account. It would be gone before the summer ended and that was not even accounting for her seventh year of tuition. They had discussed selling the family house when the time came. Marietta faced an uncertain future and had already begun to realize that she would be persona non grata in Wizarding Britain. Despite her good grades, her tarnished family name would afford virtually no job opportunities.

“Here we are. I will go fetch some refreshments. It is about twenty minutes to sunset and the view from here is quite nice.” Marietta said gesturing to the parlor’s bay window. She left her guests and went into the kitchen to retrieve the tea set and pastries. Returning to her guests she offered the refreshments.

“May, I have your names so that I can announce you to my father properly? Please excuse my rudeness. Father did not provide me with the details of this evening.”

Bella was going to enjoy this. “My escorts are Charles Higgs, patron of the Higgs family, his eldest son Terrence and I am Lady Bellatrix Black-Lestrangle.”

As Bella expected, Marietta’s eyes bulged and her jaw dropped in a most unladylike fashion. To the young lady’s credit, she did not faint but did clutch at the back of a chair to steady herself. After a pause of about ten seconds where her eyes blinked rapidly, she managed to close her mouth and turn back towards the hallway.

“Yes. Very good. I shall return with Father momentarily.” Marietta managed to stammer as she quickly walked from the room. She hurried up the steps and knocked on the library door. “Father, Lady Bellatrix Black-Lestrangle and her escorts Mr. Charles Higgs and Mr. Terrence Higgs have arrived.” She finished with a gulp.

Jaques Edgecombe stood up quickly and looked at his daughter’s pale complexion. “I am sorry for not telling you sooner, Marietta. I hope you will forgive me.”

“We are not going to become Death Eaters are we?” She whispered rapidly losing even more color.

“No my dear, provided everything goes as planned. We must not keep them waiting.” He answered.

They hurried back to the parlor, where Marietta introduced her father. She made sure there was more than enough tea in the pot and sat on the couch next to her father, but closest to the hallway. Marietta struggled to balance the need to be a proper hostess with the knowledge that her guest was in the words of the normally restrained

Neville Longbottom –“The most vile psychotic bitch to ever see the light of day.”

“Good evening milady and welcome to our home.”

“Thank you for having us. I trust your wife is well.”

“As well as can be expected during this difficult time. We are coping as best we can.”

“That is good to hear,” Bella replied pleasantly in her best high society manners, “The refreshments are lovely, but perhaps we should get to business.”

“As you wish Lady Lestrangle.”

With that the elder Higgs opened a leather carrying case. From it he produced several documents. “The first document is a standard marriage contract for Terrence and Marietta to be concluded within one month of her graduation from school. The second contains the financial terms for the bride price and a schedule of payments. The third is the magical binding acceptance of documents one and two. Please review for any missing details.” Jaques Edgecombe accepted the paperwork and began to review their contents.

Marietta was glad she had remained sitting. For the second time in minutes, she nearly fainted. Her eyes locked on to Terry Higgs. He also looked very uncomfortable. She remembered him vaguely. He had graduated when she was in her third year. She thought he had been on the Slytherin quidditch team, but wasn’t sure. He had short curly black hair a stern looking expression on his face and a slightly oversized, but not Snape-like nose. Her mind tried in vain to acknowledge that she was now engaged and this was her intended.

Mr. Higgs looked at his uncomfortable looking son and future daughter-in-law with a hint of resignation. “Perhaps while we discuss the arrangements, your daughter could show Terry around the house and they could have a private conversation.”

“Yes. That is probably best. Marietta, why don’t you take young master Higgs out to the garden.”

“Um okay.” She muttered having lost all her composure. She stood and slowly moved out of the room. Terry sat rooted to the spot for a moment until an encouraging look from his father or more likely the intimidating look from Bellatrix prompted him to follow her out of the parlor.

They exited into the backyard in silence. Marietta had her arms crossed protectively as they stood by the small water fountain that was the centerpiece of a well-maintained garden. They stood there quietly for a minute before Terry decided to break the ice.

“It is really nice to meet you. You are much prettier than I expected.” Probably not the best opening line, but it was all he could think of at the moment.

“Thanks. I suppose.”

“I am just as shocked by this as you are. This all came out of nowhere about three days ago.”

“Are you a Death Eater?” At least she was straightforward.

“No.” He said rolling back his sleeves for her inspection.

“Do you plan on becoming one?”

“Not if I can help it. Dad and Mum took the mark, but a family should always have at least one member not marked, who is of age. All the assets and voting privileges are now in my name. I don’t have anything to worry about it until my little brother turns seventeen. He just finished second year.”

“So what do you do?”

“I work for Thorn Publications as a junior copy editor. I handle most of the updates and errata to the textbooks. You know when new information comes out and the books need to be changed?”

“Sounds interesting.” She tried to say.

"Sounds boring is more like it!" He chuckled saying what she really meant. "My other option was waiting tables or other clerk work in Diagon Alley. I never really liked big crowds, but it pays the bills and I actually get to read alot."

"Why do you worry about that if your family is loaded? I mean your folks are buying me."

"That's not our money. I don't even know who is paying."

"Okay, I'll bite. Why? Its not like my family has a massive amount going for it right now. We are pretty much a charity case."

"Best I can tell is that your family is a charity case with a hereditary vote in the government. I think that is what this is all about."

Marietta thought for a moment that for a Slytherin, Terry was unusually forthcoming. Perhaps there was no advantage to be exploited. They were in this together, so laying out the brutal truth might be the best play from his standpoint. She chided herself for trying to oversimplify such a complex situation.

"Are they going to make us take the mark?"

"Not at least until you graduate. Then they will go after either you or your dad. Merlin maybe both after we, well after we get married. Once, that happens either you or I could control the valuables and voting rights for both families. Only one us would be necessary then." Both said nothing for the moment as the implications of what had just been said.

"Why did your mom do it and not you?"

"They tested us both. I tried really hard too. She was better. It was humiliating. I couldn't even look her in the eye for two days. She told me that she was proud of me though and that she didn't hold back. Her maternal instinct to protect her child, I guess. She wants to meet you. Said that you sounded really nice."

"Why didn't she come tonight?"

"She wanted to, but they had something else for Mum to do. They sent her instead. I am guessing that they didn't want your father to even consider backing out. Shit! Just being around her scares the crap out of me!" Marietta did not need to be told who "they" or "she" were. She suspected that his complete humiliation at being unable to outperform his mother had caused this sudden willingness to provide the details of their mutual destiny. She started to wonder if her "test" was held today, would she be able to beat him? She reasoned that she most likely could. His confidence was already been reduced to smithereens. Terry might even have a problem against his little brother right now.

"Have you told anyone yet?"

"Just Walter, my brother."

"What did he say?"

"He asked if Mum and Dad will buy him a woman when he gets older. The little brat is currently regrowing all the hair on his body. He said you had the word 'SNEAK' on your face for the last few months of school. What happened there?"

"Got a nasty little curse from Hermoine Granger. She failed to mention that a sign up sheet for a study group was a magically binding contract. It was a clever bit of work too. Stumped Madame Pomfrey for a few weeks. Instead of cursing my body, she cursed my uppermost layer of skin. Since the top layer is dead and not living, it was easier to enchant as an object. It was even self-renewing as more skin died it just reappeared. I practically scrubbed my face raw. Finally, the nurse had enough and told her that if it didn't get removed, she would see to it that this and several other incidents would end up in her permanent academic record. Madame Pomfrey went on to say that she couldn't stop Dumbledore from keeping her on as Prefect next year, but the Head Boy and Girl positions are voted on by the staff and the longer that curse remained the less likely Ms. Smartypants would be getting her vote. She caved pretty quickly though it still took the rest of the term to clear."

"What caused the curse?" He said taken back that one of Hogwart's most publicized little Gryffindors would do something so underhanded.

"I turned the group in. It was not authorized and Mother was pressuring me to help Delores Umbridge out any way I could. After I did it, I wasn't exactly Miss Popularity. Didn't help that my best friend was actually trying to date Harry Bloody Potter! Cho stood by me, but I know she blames me for it not working out. We barely talk any more."

"I read that Umbridge was in jail too."

"Merlin she was the worst DADA ever! She only taught theory! It was like learning theory from a hag that thought you were only two years old."

"Hey I had to take my NEWTS with Lockhart's preparation, if you could call what he did help! She couldn't have been worse than him. He single handedly cost most of my class a full letter grade on our Defense NEWT."

"Trust me she was. Even Quirell looked good in comparison. If you could stand the stuttering, you could occasionally pick something useful up."

They laughed for a minute. Marietta was actually enjoying herself around Terry. Maybe there was hope for him after all. He clearly wasn't a Crabbe, Goyle or Flint! From his job, she now knew that he was rather bookish, which given her Ravenclaw leanings was a nice trait. She reflected on her past boyfriends. Most of them were friends of whomever Cho had been dating at the time. Thankfully, Cho and Harry didn't work out, otherwise she might have ended up dating Ron Weasley! Looking back she had always been "Cho's okay looking best friend". She remembered her fourth year when on not just one but two occasions boys asked her out just as a stepping stone to try and ask Cho out. Terry seemed at least genuinely interested in her. That in itself was a nice change.

"We should probably get back and find out what else they have decided for us." Terry said with a hint of bitterness.

"I suppose. Listen, Terry you seem like a nice guy. Who knows maybe this will all work out? I keep thinking, it could be a lot worse. I will make you a deal. I will keep an open mind, if you do the same."



Terry smiled at her encouragement and offered his arm to escort her back inside. She gave him a pleasant smile and took she accepted it and the two walked back inside to face two fathers and a psychopath. The Edgecombe house elf had made a lovely ham this evening. Marietta hoped it would be to everyone's taste. She suddenly wanted to impress her future husband and father-in-law. She also hoped that the crazy bitch would avoid killing her and her father.

Many hours later an owl circled the sky in a different part of the countryside. It looked for a good place to land, but the smoke and still burning fires obscured its view. The owl's internal senses told her that she was at Longbottom Estate, but there was little left but a battle-damaged shell and considerable amount of rubble. The frame of an expensive greenhouse still stood, but all the glass had been shattered from repeated curses. The aging broomshed still smouldered as it and the brooms inside continued to burn.

The owl flew closer avoiding the columns of smoke that drifted lazily into the predawn sky. Her sharp eyes spotted a leg belonging to an elderly woman jutting out from a pile of rubble. The leg was covered in bruises and cuts. Instinct told the owl that she would not be receiving anymore post. Ominous crumbling sounds could be heard and the owl knew that she could not stay in the ruins. She took to the air again making a pass over the destroyed greenhouse and broomshed. The messenger could guess that the battle, lead from the house to the greenhouse and from there it went to the broomshed and continued down to the pond. Scorch marks could be seen on the small dock. Her sharp eyes spotted a wand lying in the grass next to the dock. The bird could sense that her letter's recipient was near. She settled onto one of the undamaged dock pylons to wait for her message to be claimed.

Twenty minutes later, a sound could be heard. A quiet splash which marked someone's return to the surface. A young man soon to be sixteen treaded water for a moment feeling his neck and inspecting his hands. Satisfied that all was in order he swam to the dock and pulled himself up the creaking ladder. The young man had was barechested and barefoot, but wore some obviously soaked denim pants. After a minute of searching he retrieved his wand from the embankment. The owl hooted at him. He had not noticed her until

now. She spread her wings and flew over to him, landing and extending her leg with the message attached.

Neville Longbottom looked at the owl's ministry markings as he took the parchment from the owl's leg. He was not expecting anything from the ministry. The battle, if you could call it such was so fast he had never really been able to fire off a spell. He doubted that there was an underage use of magic warning.

"Perhaps my bloody OWL results." He muttered saying the first words in four hours as he opened it.

It was a note from Harry Potter! Susan Bones and her family had been attacked last night. So this just wasn't an isolated raid. There was more going on. He could barely read the writing in the early morning light. Sunrise would be here shortly. Under normal circumstances he would be pleased to read of the passing of Rudolphus Lestrage. One less Lestrage in the world was clearly a good thing, but he knew by looking at what remained of his family home that his grandmother's body would be in there somewhere.

Neville had been in the greenhouse. It was after midnight and he had gotten up to care for a few of the plants that were best maintained in the light of the moon. Breeding a strong plant strain often requires periodic feedings and treatments at odd hours. Standing out there in the quiet of the night amongst his many plants, Neville felt at peace.

Shouts and spells rudely interrupted his peace of mind as the main house came under attack. Neville spun and grabbed his newly purchased wand. He peered out an opening to try and count the number of attackers. At least eight could be seen. He was grossly outnumbered and the main house was ablaze. One of the raiders began casting blasting curses at the greenhouse. Neville forced himself to the ground as the panes of opaque glass shattered spraying glass everywhere. He rolled trying to avoid cutting himself too badly. Half the main house had already collapsed, including to his horror the section where his grandmother's bedroom lay. Grabbing a sealed jar from the shelf he stumbled out the back of the greenhouse. He staggered towards the broomshed for a moment, but it too became engulfed in flames.

Neville knew with a certainty that his grandmother was dead, his house destroyed and that he had no means of escaping the property. The jar held his only hope for surviving this ordeal. He stumbled down towards the pond tripping as he hit the docks. One of the attackers saw him and began firing spells in his direction. Neville cursed knowing that he had dropped his wand, but couldn't see it in the darkness. Opening the jar he quickly stuffed some of the contents in his mouth. The next curse hit the dock next to him and he made a big show off falling into the pond.

Five minutes later a man with a silver hand stood on the dock. He asked for a report from the one of his subordinates. The new recruit smiled at his team leader.

"Yes, I saw the boy run out of the greenhouse. Got him with a stunner and he fell into the water. He's been down there for a while now. He would have drowned by now."

"Let's be certain. He could be under the dock listening to us right now!"

Gesturing with his wand Peter Pettigrew incanted, "Point me Neville Longbottom!" His answer was a greenish hue in the middle of the pond about fifteen feet below the surface. The aura was stationary. Peter and his subordinate watched the aura for another two minutes before it faded.

"Good work. The master will be pleased with us all." Peter said. It was hopefully the first of many raids his master would allow him to lead. He would prove his worth once and for all. Peter was oh so tired of the jeers of all the other Death Eater's. Most of whom were currently incarcerated. They would refer to him as "Wormie", "Master's pet rodent" and many other names. He was incensed. Who among them risked everything to bring the Master back to life. Where was their "superior loyalty" as they sat in their mansions basking in their wealth? The Dark Lord had kept him in the shadows, until the death of Sirius Black. There was no further need to hide again. Peter did not even care if he wore the mask or not. It was liberating. He would be feared. He would kill and he would enjoy every single second of it.

Neville remained still at the bottom of the pond. He noticed his body glow and realized they were checking on him. He had fins and claws. If they decided to “Accio” him, he would accelerate and come out slashing. Fortunately, they did not and a few agonizing minutes later the green glow faded. Neville waited down there until he began to feel the effects of the gillyweed wear off. Quickly, he ate some more. He waited again. Four full hours he spent down there brooding. He would need to wait until there was enough light to find his wand. Then he could summon help – maybe the Knight Bus. He would need to get ahold of the aurors, his uncle and the headmaster. He was not the strategist that Ron was. He did not have Hermione’s brains or Harry’s sheer heroism. What he did have was a wand lying up there somewhere and a burning thirst for revenge. Voldemort’s followers had taken another family member from him. It was time he started taking back.

## Chapter 6 – The Next Day

Harry woke to the savory smell of sausage. He was still exhausted. The night had been one of the longest of his short life. He had fought physically with Tom Riddle and verbally with Albus Dumbledore and somehow in each case the fight ended in a draw. If Hermione did not have such a hang up on authority figures, she would be impressed when he told her. Ron Weasley, his other best friend would be proud of him, but in a decidedly ironic twist he would also be more than a little jealous. Harry considered burrowing back beneath the covers and trying to steal an extra hour of sleep, but was reprimanded by the growl in his stomach. The Dursley's had found yet another reason to deny him a meal. He clucked his tongue thinking of the next time Ron felt jealous of his great life. He imagined himself saying, "Gee old buddy, you can have it. Just remember one thing, when your with the Dursley's be prepared to skip every other meal. Hope you don't mind fighting evil on an empty stomach!"

He got out of his bed and looked around the room. It was depressing to be back at Number 12. It was his now. He half expected to see his godfather pop into the room and verbally give him a swift kick in the arse to get him moving. He tried not to dwell on it, biting his lower lip. Sirius wouldn't want it that way. Sirius would want him to remember the good, forget the bad and become a man he would be proud of. Looking at his nightstand and the shattered Death Eater mask he also knew that Sirius would want him to be triumphant. Harry dressed in silence as he considered his history, reflecting on battles both recent and old he came to a conclusion. He could win. At age eleven, he killed a wizard possessed by Tom. At age twelve, he beat Tom and his pet snake admittedly with some help. He has driven off a horde of dementors, competed in and won the Triwizard tournament. Harry was always telling Neville that he needed a confidence boost. Perhaps he should listen to his own advice now and then.

Harry looked over at the other bed in the room. Susan was buried under there. Her head covered by a pillow. He felt guilty. She no doubt had heard his nightmares. It was impressive that she didn't just get up and go to another room. She looked awful. Normally she was quite pretty and friendly. She was always smiling. It was rumored that Susan's trademark smile held up even during potions. The smile was

nowhere to be found on the sleeping face he beheld. A second hunger pang reminded him that he needed to get some food. As quiet as possible, he crept from the room and went to the bathroom.

Minutes later he was descending the stairs into the kitchen. There were two house elves and a very tired looking Bill Weasley there. Dobby immediately rushed to him latching onto his right leg with a deathgrip. He pried Dobby from his leg with great effort.

"Hello Bill. Good to see you again."

"You to Harry. You can't seem to stay out of trouble can you?" He asked with a tired smile as he drank his coffee.

"Unfortunately, trouble has a way of finding me and I get the nasty feeling that it is only going to get worse."

"True enough. I just got off a Gringotts. They are checking security and also contracting us out to do private warding. Heck, I am supposed to be at a job this afternoon. Dumbledore caught me as I was leaving and asked if I would check the wards here and keep watch until he gets a relief for me."

"How are the wards?"

"They look nice and tight. Some of the best work I have ever seen. Though a lot of it is dark in nature, but the previous generations seemed to have a certain, how to say it? Ah yes, they possessed a certain moral flexibility when it came to the use of magic."

Harry chuckled at Bill's description. "Does dark magic make for better wards?"

"Nastier yes. Better not necessarily. Much of it is really intent based. If you are just looking to keep people out nothing beats a good Confundo wrapped around a muggle repeller. No need to flay their skin off their body when you can just as easily send them on their way. Unless that is, you are up for a good flaying."

"Did you happen to do Amelia Bones's house?"

“No. Cooper and Hawksworth’s team did that job – I think. Why?”

“I was there last night. Voldemort attacked. The wards held for awhile. He’s using inferni, had over twenty there. They swarmed the wards and brought them down.”

“You fought him last night?” Bill asked wide-eyed.

“Not so much. I showed up and caught him with his knickers in a bunch and hit him with a lucky shot. He was worn out and that was enough to drive him off.” Harry said trying to minimize his role. “My point was that he is using lots of inferni to wear out the wards. I don’t know if you can do anything to compensate for that?”

“Well not really. You can always pump more energy into the wards during their creation. That will make them last a little longer, but not forever.”

They both considered the information each had given. Harry broke the silence, “Bill, how strong are the wards on the Burrow?”

“Good not great. Probably not as good as the Bones job and nowhere near this place.”

“Can they be upgraded?”

“I see where you are going. I don’t think Mum and Dad will go for it, but they would have to be torn down and redone to do it right. With the current climate it wouldn’t come cheaply either. I could do it by myself, but it would take the better part a week. Hiring a team is the best way to go, but Gringotts is booked solid and private firms will rob you blind!”

“What you are saying is the best bet is to get them moved here as fast as possible?”

“Pretty much. Dumbledore said he was going to go see Mum and Dad today and see if they will start moving over. I will feel safer when they are here.”

“Do you know who is going to be on guard here?”

"I think he is going to use Emmy Vance, Mr. Diggle and Mrs. Jones. Though I am not certain."

Harry looked slightly disappointed. He had been hoping to spend time with Remus Lupin. Both had lost a great deal when Sirius fell through the veil in the Department of Mysteries. He missed the good-natured, but shabbily dressed werewolf. The man had a certain natural honesty that was almost a disarming quality. Trying to cheer himself up and take a shot at Bill, Harry raised an eyebrow, "Emmy?"

"Yeah. We were in school together. We went to Hogsmeade a couple of times. Obviously, you are not going to ever mention this to Fleur. My pranks are nowhere near as good natured as the twins and I think you would be impressed by my extensive knowledge of curses." Bill lightly threatened.

Harry decided to go with a cheeky response, "Bill, I am not afraid of the Dark Tosser. Why should I be afraid of you?"

Bill just shook his head. "You have a point there Harry. I would just appreciate it though. Fleur isn't used to guys being resistant to her powers. She is having an awful time dealing with the new found emotion of jealousy. She is used to being the girl somebody else is jealous of, not the other way around. I have already been forced to describe my last three relationships in painful detail and since Ms. Vance is further back than that, I believe that the less said the better."

"Don't worry just having a little fun. There seems to be a shortage of that these days. Lots of bad news and hardly any good news. Why do you think you are resistant to her powers? I am as well."

"Probably my curse breaker training. Their testing said I had an impressive natural resistance to mind altering magic. The training just reinforced it."

"Oh. That makes sense." Harry replied. He was thinking about how easily he could throw off the Imperious curse.

The breakfast made by Trixie, Susan's house elf was impressive if not unusual. The standard fare of bacon and sausages were there,



but also she made omelets and sausage gravy served on top of biscuits.

“What exactly do you call this?” Bill asked the house elf.

“Biscuits and gravy. Is a dish from America. Miss Amelia go to meetings all the time. She like the food and show Trixie how to make. Miss Susan’s favorite is biscuits and gravy. Trixie want to help Miss Susan be happy again.”

“It is very good. I am sure Susan will like it when she comes down. You obviously take good care of her.” Harry said trying to calm the frantic house elf. He knew from his experiences with Dobby to give a house elf as much positive reinforcement as possible.

The little female house elf was shocked by the praise. The other elf she had briefly met had told of the great and kind wizard Harry Potter, but she had been skeptical. Most elves speak of their owners in such a fashion. What had really surprised her was when Dobby explained that Harry Potter was not Dobby’s owner. He had freed Dobby from cruel masters. Most house elves dreaded the idea of being free. Most would rather serve even abusive masters, then chance freedom. Dobby seemed to be enjoying himself though. Recognition and appreciation from your human mistresses was rare, but expected. However for someone outside of the family to house elf relationship to speak to an elf in such a manner was virtually unheard of. Trixie was flabbergasted. Humans could not tell when a house elf blushes, but she was blushing profusely at the moment.

Twenty minutes later, a very tired and still exhausted Susan Bones awakened. She tried for about five more minutes to recapture the comfort, but her effort was in vain. Her eyes darted around the unfamiliar room. For a brief moment she wondered where she was, until it all came back to her. She spent the next few minutes catching up on her crying as she sobbed silently into the orange pillow. She intended to stay longer, but the growl in her stomach combined with the need to go to the bathroom prevailed. She noted that Harry was already downstairs. Grabbing her dressing gown she went across the hallway to the bathroom. The face in the mirror was not the happily amused young woman that she usually saw. Her eyes and cheeks

were puffed and red. Her hair was a frightening mess. Despite the incessant growling of her stomach, she opted to take a quick shower. While she gathered her things and started the shower, she tried to think of what she had to do today.

She would need to contact Gringotts and the family legal representation. They would be able to take care of the final arrangements for her mother and aunt. She didn't need to, but really wanted to talk to Hanna Abbott. Her best friend was a really good shoulder to cry on, she thought as she stood in the shower with her forehead against the wall, letting the water run down her back. As she showered, she tried to clear her mind and focus on nothing but the act of showering. It seemed to help - somewhat.

Eventually even her shower refuge ended. She felt guilty using so much hot water. Quickly she dressed and tried to tame her hair. A loose ponytail was about all that she could manage. She knew that she could not hide any longer and she made her way downstairs. Harry was first to see her.

"Hello Susan. Did you sleep okay? This is Bill Weasley, Ron's oldest brother. He is here to check the wards and keep us company until the next guard gets here." Bill waved a quick greeting, which she acknowledged with a brief smile. Harry was babbling slightly, but Susan didn't mention it.

"I guess I slept as well as can be expected. Good morning Trixie. I smell biscuits and gravy. Thank you."

"Miss Susan is too kind to poor Trixie." The elf exclaimed while setting a plate of food in front of her and rushing to get a pitcher of juice.

"Harry can we use the floo to call someone?" She asked. Harry had to look at Bill.

"You can Susan, but you need to keep it short and not tell anyone where you are."

"What can I tell them?"

"Tell them that you are in a safe house right now and being guarded for your safety."

"Okay. I can do that."

Susan quickly finished her breakfast. She had been much hungrier than she had believed and then started a fire in the fireplace. She threw in a pinch of Floo powder and called out for the Abbott household. Chelsea, Hannah's younger sister answered and went to fetch Hannah. A minute later Hannah and her trademark pigtails came bouncing into the room.

"Morning Susan. Is something wrong with your Floo? I tried to call earlier, but it wouldn't work."

"No its not okay," Susan started in a voice that started out trembling and was threatening to turn into sobbing any second. "We were attacked last night. Mum and Auntie are gone!"

"Ohmigod! Are you okay? Where are you? Do you need us to come get you?"

"I am physically fine and I am at a safe location, but I am not supposed to let anyone know where right now. As soon as I can tell, you'll be the first to know."

"I am so sorry about your mum and aunt. Is there anything I can do?" Hannah said feeling quite helpless tears already starting down her cheek. Hannah had been quite fond of Dana and Amelia Bones.

"No. Not that I can think of, but if I think of anything I will let you know."

"Are you sure you are safe where you are at?"

"So, I am told. I wish I could tell you more. I need to keep this short so I better run."

"Be careful Susan!"

"You too Hannah. Keep your wand on you at all times. Bye!"

Susan pulled her head out of the fireplace and saw Bill and Harry were still talking. The odd thing was she hadn't heard them at all. Noticing that she was no longer on the floor, Harry nudged Bill who waved his wand dispelling the privacy charm. He smiled at her.

"Harry insisted you be able to talk without being overheard." Bill shrugged looking at Harry who got a slight reddish tinge on his face. Bill smiled thinking "That's for your 'Emmy' comment twerp!"

"Thank you Harry. That was very thoughtful. I didn't say where I was staying. Hannah is worried though. I can tell."

"We will know more when Dumbledore comes back. He will probably let you go to Hannah's or get her to come here at least for a visit."

"Do you really think so?"

"Probably, although you never know. He is usually pretty flexible – with everyone else." Harry said with a touch of bitterness. Both Susan and Bill let it go, but they each filed that information away for later use.

Neville searched the ruins of his family home for anything remotely useful. So far he scrounged a mostly undamaged cloak to wrap around himself, his grandmother's wand, her change purse with roughly fourteen galleons inside and some shoes. According to his watch, which thankfully survived being in the pond with him, it was just shy of eight am. He threw a couple of other odds and ends into a battered trunk and started dragging it towards the road. As he was headed up the walkway he heard a distinctive crack of someone apparating. Not wanting to chance it he drew his wand. Sure enough there was a cloaked death eater standing on the other side of the road.

"Well well! Come back to set off the Mark and what do I find. Little lost Longbottom." The Death Eater taunted dodging a stunning spell directed at him. "Let's see if you can hit what you can't see."

With that the Death Eater disillusioned himself. Neville cursed himself while aiming curses in the general direction his opponent was. Neville was upset about the one DA meeting he had missed. Harry had covered a bit of what to do when faced with an invisible adversary.

Neville would have to improvise. As he ducked a bone breaker aimed where his head was only a moment ago. From where the curse originated his opponent was starting to cross the road.

Neville thought to himself as he stuck his wand out. "Well if I can't see him. Maybe they can't either."

Sure enough, as he dodged yet another curse from his unseen stalker. He saw the telltale signs of the arrival of the Knight Bus. It phased into being and blew its horn. Microseconds later, Neville heard a loud thump and saw a dent appear in the frame. The bus bounced slightly and he knew his invisible adversary was thrown under the tires. He ran over and grabbed his trunk as the bus came to a stop in front of him.

"Good morning and welcome to ...."

"Not to interrupt, but my house was attacked by Death Eaters. We need to get out of here."

"Holy Merlin! Come on get on! Hurry!"

"What was that noise. Sounded like we hit something?" The shrunken head asked.

"Don't know. Where to lad?"

"Somewhere where there are some aurors. I am not too picky."

"Right law enforcement headquarters it is. No charge for emergency service!"

Neville looked out the back window as the bus came up to speed. He caught himself on one of the poles as it accelerated. In the distance he saw a spec that had to have been the Death Eater. In front of the smoldering ruins of his home. As he mentally patted himself on the back for such an inventive solution a strange thought crossed his mind.

"I wonder if I will be able to see a Thestral or not because he was invisible?"

Minutes later, the bus pulled up to a nondescript looking building. To the muggles it would look like a closed down factory, but in reality it was the secondary headquarters for British Magical Law Enforcement. Their primary headquarters was in Diagon Alley, but this one served to deploy forces outside of the alley. The ministry had learned a painful lesson during Voldemort's first rise to have several headquarters. Unfortunately recent budget cuts during the Fudge administration had lead to the closing of the other two headquarters outside of the Alley.

Neville disembarked dragging the trunk. He opened the door and found a small waiting area with only two people waiting and a grizzled looking desk wizard, who reminded him of Mad Eye Moody.

"Forget to dress boy?" He said noting Neville's bare chest not quite covered by his tattered cloak.

"Death Eater's attacked my house last night!" Neville snapped back. The man immediately became dead serious.

"Where?"

Neville recited his address and the man gestured to several aurors. A tall bald headed man came forward. Neville recognized him as one of the people from the battle at the Department of Mysteries.

"Kingsley, this boy's house has been attacked. Here is the address. Take a team over there."

"Um sir. There might still be one there." Neville said addressing Kingsley.

"Where?"

"Last I saw he was lying in the street. He might be dead though."

"Why is that?"

"They had been gone for several hours. I was grabbing what I could and leaving. He apparated back in and said something about setting of the Dark Mark and started cursing me. I tried to fight back but he

made himself invisible. I uh, uh I did the only thing I could think of. I summoned the Knight Bus. They kind of ran him over. They were wondering what they hit, but I didn't tell them. I didn't want to make them upset."

Kingsley and the desk wizard looked at the young wizard with open mouths. Kingsley then smiled widely and shook his head in appreciation. The desk wizard chortled under his breath.

"Come on I will take you to my office where you can wait." He said looking at the address. "You are Frank and Alice's boy aren't you?"

Neville nodded. "Neville Longbottom sir." He introduced himself.

"I was at their wedding. They would be proud of you. Jenkins get over here. This is Neville Longbottom. Put him in my office. Get him something to eat and a shirt. I will get a statement from him when I get back. Tallwood and Fulton you are with me. You relax in there Neville."

"Sir. My grandmother's body is there." Neville said no longer able to meet the man's eyes. Tears welling in his eyes.

The expression on Kingsley Shacklebolt's face hardened. "We will take care of her. You have my word."

With that the trio of aurors disappeared. Auror Jenkins led Neville to a small office and gestured to a couch. He told Neville to wait here and he would return with a shirt. Five minutes later he returned with a shirt, a tray with a pair of breakfast pastries, a Styrofoam cup of juice and today's copy of the Daily Prophet.

"Here you go lad. My desk is just outside the office, a couple of cubicles down. Just come out if you need anything. If I am not there go see the desk wizard. Breakroom and restrooms are just down the hall to the right. Auror Shacklebolt will probably be at the scene for a few hours so by all means make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you sir." Neville said putting on the grey sweatshirt emblazoned with the logo of DMLE and settling in on the couch. He tried to get comfortable while looking at the Prophet. There was no

mention of last night's attacks, but considering the time they occurred it was not surprising. Somehow catching up on quidditch team training camp news and gossip from the society page just could not hold his attention. Looking around the room he saw several awards and memorabilia. Beneath one award, was a picture of Kingsley receiving the award from none other than Alastor Moody. For a few minutes, he watched the photograph of Kingsley walk up to the podium take the award and shake the Ex-auror's hands, then turn with a big grin towards the crowd who can be seen applauding.

Shortly after 8 am, people went into a frenzy of activity. Neville heard several reports of Dark Marks being set off. Neville realized that last night must have been a coordinated effort. By 8:15 am the office was mostly deserted with virtually all-available personnel dispatched to the various crime scenes. Neville finished his breakfast and scrounged a pair of recent magazines from the breakroom. Sometime around 9:30 am, he actually managed to fall asleep on the couch.

Kingsley Shacklebolt woke the young man shortly after 1 PM. He had planned on returning quickly, but they were summoned from the Longbottom attack to two other attacks. Apparently, he-who-must-not-be-named had wanted to make his presence felt all over the English countryside last night. Most of the attacks were against old pureblood families, who were known opponents of the Dark. The Goldsteins and the Smith families had been completely wiped out. The Compton's fourteen year old daughter was missing and on top of which, Kingsley now faced the task of telling young Neville that aside from Frank and Alice, that he was the last of the Longbottoms.

"I am sorry it took me so long to get back to you Neville."

"I understand sir, I heard there were many other attacks. How bad was it?"

"Very bad. I am afraid they also attacked your Great Uncle's estate. There were no survivors. I am sorry to be the one to tell you."

Neville looked away from the man, who had placed his large hand on the distraught young man's shoulder. He wanted to scream. He wanted to cry. He wanted to break something, or someone. Kingsley



watched as Neville's clenched his fists repeatedly. After a minute, Neville mumbled something. The auror had to ask him to repeat it.

"I said. Who else was attacked?"

"I am not supposed to say, but the Goldstein, Compton and Smith families. It will be all over the Prophet tomorrow and the Wireless Network by the evening."

Neville knew Tony Goldstein, Marcia Compton and Zacharias Smith from the DA. He also knew that Susan's house had been attacked. He reached into his pocket, retrieved the note from Harry Potter and handed it to the Auror.

"Sir, everyone who was attacked last night had a person who was in Harry's defense club at school and was from a pureblood family. Do you think there might be a connection?"

"You could be on to something there. Who else is was in that club, who might fit the description?"

The two spent the next twenty minutes listing the roster of the DA. It was ironic that Neville knew all the names, because for the first few meetings he had been passed from partner to partner, as no one had wanted to work with him. Kingsley called Jenkins and the other two aurors into the office to brief them on the theory. It may just have been a coincidence, but it certainly merited investigation. One of the missing pieces was how the attackers had known the current addresses of all their victims. There were two possibilities and both were within the ministry.

"Tallwood, you and Jenkins go to the Department of Magical Education and see if anyone has pulled the records for the people who were attacked and who might fit the description. Fulton and I will go to the Improper Use of Magic Office with Mr. Longbottom here. I have to brief the watch commander. You two go ahead. We will leave as soon as I tell Beverly."

Five minutes later Kingsley had his supervisor's permission and they were soon at the Office of Improper Use of Magic. Madame Hopkirk's secretary acknowledged them and went to get her superior. Madame

Hopkirk was not very pleased at the implications of the theory when it was presented to her behind closed doors. She reluctantly agreed to show them how they access the records by tapping their wand on a filing cabinet. Fortunately, the system annotates each instance the file is accessed. The expression on her face became rigid as soon as the first three checks showed that Phillip Chambers had accessed all the records eight days ago. Coincidentally enough, Mr. Chambers had scheduled vacation for the next three days. She had her assistant continue checking, while she provided Kingsley with Mr. Chamber's address and allowed him to use her Floo connection back to Law Enforcement Headquarters.

Shortly thereafter, three aurors appeared outside of Phillip Chamber's flat near Kent. Mr. Kent was not home, but two sets of Death Eater garb were found in his bedroom closet. They went outside to wait for his return. Six hours later, Phillip Chambers would be in custody after a brief exchange of spells.

Meanwhile, Kingsley requested that the now pale Madame Hopkirk use her owls to warn the all the other families whose records had been accessed as the distinct possibility of more attacks loomed. Sadly, Kingsley could not tell if she was concerned more for her position and loss of prestige, then the actual crimes committed by one of her subordinates. Internally, he shook his head at just another instance where the Ministry continues to fail the witches and wizards it was supposed to protect. He left Fulton to finish up there and took Neville to a designated apparation point.

"You've done side-along apparation before? Correct?"

"Only once, a long time ago." Neville replied nervously.

"Don't worry. Hold on to me. I am a professional." The auror said trying to reassure him. With a louder than normal crack they disappeared only to reappear in front of the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. One of the calls he had placed in Mrs. Hopkirk's office was to Dumbledore to determine what to do with young Neville.

"Hear read this and then look up." He said giving Neville a scrap of parchment.

Neville did as he was told and watched as the house sprang into existence. As they walked up to the house, he remembered something that he wanted to ask the auror.

“Sir, the Death Eater at my house? What happened to him?”

“Oh, he was quite dead when we got there. The Knight Bus sure did a number on him. He was one of the Travers brothers. I won’t lose any sleep over it and neither should you.” He said clapping Neville on the back as he knocked on the door.

Susan was in much better spirits after speaking with Hannah. She had Trixie move her belongings into the room, which Harry had told her was normally used by Ginny and Hermoine. Susan actually managed to laugh when she encountered Dobby for the first time. The free house elf did his level best to knock Harry over as he flew across the room to hug him. Harry appeared terribly embarrassed, but seemed to take it in stride. She watched the interaction between Harry and the house elf with fascination. It was almost like watching an older brother play with a younger. Very few people would even make the attempt to become that close to a house elf. By contrast, Susan had always been polite to Trixie, and received her adoration, but it had always been a servant relationship. Susan promised herself that she would try to emulate Harry’s example.

Bill Weasley left and had been replaced by Ms. Vance. Susan caught an exchange between Harry and Bill as Bill welcomed the attractive woman who looked to be just about thirty. She was certain there was a story there. Perhaps Harry would tell her later. She watched with mild amusement as Dobby and Trixie quarreled over who was going to make lunch. Harry settled the argument by having Trixie make lunch and asking Dobby to go to the Burrow and help the Weasley’s pack. The matriarch of the Weasley clan briefly arrived to drop off some items and made a tremendous fuss over Harry, further embarrassing him. She hardly even noticed Susan, which depressed her slightly. Mrs. Weasley let Harry know that her family would be there just before sundown and thanked him for sending Dobby over. It was obvious to Susan that Mrs. Weasley had a special place in her heart for the Boy-Who-Lived. That revelation made a pang of longing surface under Susan’s carefully maintained façade. She trembled

slightly wondering if anyone would make that kind of fuss over her again. Savagely, she forced those feelings back down inside her.

After lunch, Susan asked Harry to help her look through her Aunt's spell books for useful material. They opened the trunk and selected several books to start reading. They spent the next two hours in relative silence that was broken on occasion.

"Harry, come look at this. It looks like a very powerful cutting curse!" She said pointing to the page she was reading.

"Oh. I think Tonks mentioned that one before! Let's add it to the list. Make sure you get the page number and the book title."

"Okay. Do you think the DA will be an official school organization this year?"

"I don't know. I can't see Dumbledore turning us down. Well at least turning you guys down. If we get a competent Defense against the Dark Arts instructor, he might say no. I will believe the competent part when I see it. If I have to I will just practice and whoever shows up I will practice with."

"Just let me know and I will be there. Will you teach me the one you used on Voldemort?" She said with just a hint of a pause saying the dreaded name. Susan figured that she had laid eyes on him and survived, that earned her the right to say his name.

"Sure, but I still wasn't thinking straight when I cursed him. There were at least two other spells I should have used that would have done more damage. Oh well hindsight being what it is, I am just glad I remembered the Mad Eye's golden rule of dueling."

"What's that?" Susan asked as she started mentally going over everything Moody had taught them during class.

Catching her confused expression Harry continued, "Not the fake Moody. The real one once told me the most important thing in dueling is 'Do Something'. Don't sit there and think about the best curse to use. You will paralyze yourself by trying to out think yourself. If you are in a duel and you are casting a spell, you are at least doing one

thing right. Well that and CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" He added bellowing the last part with a laugh.

"Forgive me for asking, but what is it between you and Dumbledore? I always thought you got along, but lately it doesn't look like you get along at all."

"I would rather not say. It is personal. Lets just say he could have told me some information, but chose not to. The information might have prevented someone's death."

"Sirus Black you mean." She asked cautiously.

"Yes. The whole bloody Department of Mysteries rubbish could have been prevented if he had just told me!" Harry said slamming the book down on the table. He looked up a minute later and apologized. "I am sorry. I don't want you to think I am taking it out on you. I am still pissed and you are the only one who happens to be around."

"S'okay Harry. I shouldn't have asked. Do you want to take a break? I wouldn't mind meeting that Hippogriff you have upstairs."

"Sure cmon. Buckbeak will be happy for some visitors. I wish we could take him out for a flight, but I am betting that we wouldn't be allowed."

With that the pair went to the attic, where they found the Hippogriff resting. It stirred as they walked into the room. Harry repeated Hagrid's instructions to Susan and demonstrated by bowing and waiting for the noble creature's approval prior to approaching. He stroked the side of the beast's head and fed it some vermin that either Dobby or Trixie had left. Susan nervously repeated Harry's actions. It took a bit longer for Buckbeak to bow to her. Susan felt as if she were being judged, but finally it bowed and she was allowed to approach. Buckbeak's feather's were quite soft to her touch. She also fed him a dead rat. They made small talk as they petted the Hippogriff and fed it rats. For Susan it was one of the most surreal experiences of her life. Harry mumbled something to Buckbeak about wishing that one of the rats had a silver paw. Susan almost asked him, but decided not to ruin the mood. Her earlier question about Dumbledore had all but killed a rather productive study session. They spent a

good hour and a half up there. Susan admitted that she enjoyed watching, but not playing quidditch. She preferred just flying without a purpose rather than competition. She also freely discussed her ineptitude at herbology and how much she relied on Hannah in that subject, but she made up for it by helping her friend through Ancient Runes and Charms. They talked about their future plans after school, Harry's goal of becoming an Auror and Susan's lack of any future plans.

"Isn't that awful. I still don't know what I want to do. Mum and Auntie wanted me to intern at the ministry and eventually take a position there. Being a healer sounded like a good career, but I realized that the sight of blood makes me a little queasy. I was always telling myself that I would know what I want after I took my OWLs. Well they are out of the way and I still have no idea! Good for you though, I am glad one of us knows what they want. You might want to talk to some of the aurors you know to get an idea what the rest of the job is like. They spend a horrid amount of time just processing paperwork. Auntie used to joke that the key to fighting evil was the timely processing of paperwork, because you spend more time fighting paperwork than chasing evil."

"Did she like her job?"

"Yes very much so, but she also lost herself in it. Mum used to say that Auntie never really got over Uncle Edgar's death. She would be gone before dawn and rarely made it back before supper. She became her job. If you go that route, try to remember to have some fun every now and then."

"I will try to remember that. I probably should talk to Tonks and Kingsley to see how much they really enjoy it and what their days are really like."

"You know Mr. Shacklebolt? Auntie is, was always talking about him. She said he used to get so mad when she called him Moody Jr. or Mini-Moody. She did say that he was one of the best she had ever seen."

Harry chuckled wondering if calling the towering auror by one of the aforementioned nicknames would evoke the same reaction as calling

Tonks by the dreaded “N” name – “Nymphadora”. “What the hell. Why not? According to Dumbledore only Voldemort can really kill me. Why not give it a try?”

They chatted for a few more minutes, before leaving the hippogriff and heading downstairs. Unexpectedly, they found Emmeline Vance speaking to Lisa Turpin and her younger brother. They both had trunks sitting on the ground next to them. They both looked very shocked to see Harry Potter walk into the room.

“You just missed Professor Dumbledore. He brought the Turpin children here. He said he would be back with the Abbott children soon.”

Harry was first to ask, “What’s going on?”

“I have been following the wireless while you two were up in the library. It looks like there were several other attacks last night against pureblooded families who are traditionally against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. From what I have been able to gather, the headmaster fears that there may be more attacks. So, he is trying to warn people who may be at risk. He also said that Charlie Weasley will be here this evening to take Buckbeak away. We may actually need the room depending on how many people this place will end up housing.”

“Oh okay. Hello Lisa. I would say it is good to see you, but under these circumstances I really don’t know what to say other than welcome to my home. I have never met your friend. Is it a safe guess to say he is your brother?”

“Yes. Harry this is Kevin. Kevin this is Harry Potter. Kevin is a second year Hufflepuff. Kevin, you might already know Susan Bones. She is in your house. Harry, you actually own this place? It seems a little ...”

“Dark?” Harry answered. “Yeah, but it recently came into my possession. It was the Black family home. Not exactly the ‘light’ side of the Black family either. Susan, you want to show Lisa where she can bunk. I’ll take Kevin to my room.” Kevin’s eyes were huge at the prospect of rooming with Harry Potter.

"I will come up in a minute, I am going to transfigure some bunk beds. Not as cozy as the ones you have right now, but I get the feeling that we are going to need them. Susan your house elf is cleaning some of the other spare bedrooms. I am not sure how many we are going to need. Professor Dumbledore mentioned that he might send a team of house elves from the school to lend a hand.

Harry helped Kevin Turpin with his trunk. The young Hufflepuff seemed to be another incarnation of one of the Creevy brothers from the way he was staring at Harry. Harry tried to answer just enough of the boy's questions to prevent him from becoming upset but at the same time discourage him from asking more. Crossing the hall and knocking on the girl's bedroom door, Harry could already hear the sounds of giggling. He was amused that girls could do that. In a way it was good to see Susan happy about something or at least happy to have someone else to speak with. When Lisa answered the door, he asked if she and her brother would like to see Buckbeak. Lisa need a bit of Susan's prodding, she seemed a bit squeamish. Kevin on the other hand wanted to race up to the attic. Harry had to physically restrain him and remind Kevin that he needed to be shown how to correctly approach the hippogriff.

Buckbeak took to Kevin very quickly. Lisa took much longer. Buckbeak could sense her anxiety and huffed at her uneasiness. The petite Ravenclaw finally managed to successfully approach Buckbeak but cringed at the sight of a bucket of dead rats.

"I think I will go down and find that library that cousin Emmeline was talking about. Nice to meet you Buckbeak." She said as if trying to convince herself.

Susan spoke up, "I will go with you. Harry and I have some books out right now and we are still taking notes for next year's DA." Lisa looked excited about the prospect of a continuing DA. The two young witches left and Harry and Kevin continued to pet Buckbeak. Kevin had never encountered one and Harry was doing his best to regurgitate his third year lesson from Hagrid about the flying creature.

By the time Kevin had run out of things to ask him, they were out of rats to feed. So, they went back downstairs. Harry stopped by the



library just to point it out to Kevin, who sighed seeing his sister already surrounded by a small pile of books. Susan smiled at Harry from the book she was looking through. As he started to close the door, they heard a series of loud noises from below.

“That must be the Weasleys.” Harry said reassuring the two startled witches.

Harry went down to greet his adopted family leaving Kevin in the library with his sister, but not before warning him that not all the books on the shelf have been checked for curses or dark magic. He mentioned it might be best to read the title of the book first and if it sounds the least bit sinister to not pick it up. Kevin paled slightly while shaking his head vigorously.

Harry walked back into the kitchen only to be crushed by Molly and Ginny Weasley’s combined hugs. He smiled and greeted each of them while getting a manly back slap from Ron. Dobby was already hauling the trunks up to the bedrooms, but beamed in pride when Harry thanked him for helping the Weasleys get moved from the Burrow.

“I wanted Fred and George to come as well, but they refused. They have a flat above their shop. I do hope they will be careful. They did plan to drop by sometime and send their best. I do worry about them so.” Said Mrs. Weasley casting a worried look at the family clock. The hands representing the twins alternated between ‘work’ and ‘mischief’.

“Yes. It’s a special category I added just for them.” She sighed.

Ginny decided to add, “But Mum, to them mischief is like breathing. It is their natural state. Am I right or what?”

“I definitely agree there. Good to see you mate. Have you been keeping up with the news? There were a bunch of attacks last night? I started to get worried for you.” Harry sensed the serious tone in Ron’s words. It caused Harry to reflect on the changing times, where in the past the first words out of Ron’s mouth would have something to do with either quidditch or eating. He saw Ginny was wide-eyed and nodding in agreement with her brother.

“Well you can see I am fine. Nothing to worry yourselves over.” Harry decided not to mention last night’s encounter with a certain Dark Lord.

“Of course nothing at all, Harry.” Susan’s sarcastic voice could be heard from the base of the steps.

Harry turned and gave her a look that screamed “LATER! NOT NOW!” She obviously got the hint as she walked over and shook hands with Ron and Ginny, who both looked a bit confused. Ginny actually looked slightly angry and confused, truth be told.

Deciding to explain Harry said, “It looks like we have lots of people joining us in purgatory this summer. Susan’s here and so is Lisa and Kevin Turpin. From the sounds of it there is a chance that even more people will be here soon. So you might want to claim your bedroom soon.”

As if on cue, Hannah, her sister and Dumbledore emerged from the floo connection. Susan immediately conceded the strange staring match she and Ginny were engaged in and rushed over to hug Hannah and Chelsea.

“Susan, we were so worried about you! Mom and Dad are going to take a trip to the mainland and see some of the muggle sites. Did you and Harry really fight You-Know-Who last night?”

Harry cringed at Hannah’s question as this immediately brought the full wrath of both Weasley women on him.

“Harry Potter! What in Merlin’s name were you thinking? You could have been killed! That’s it! You will not be setting one foot outside this house! Do you understand me? Albus, I will be giving you a piece of my mind over this!”

Harry shrugged his shoulders as Mrs. Weasley continued her tirade. He was pretty much expecting that. Ginny’s fierce scowl was much less expected and a bit more unnerving. Ron merely had his mouth open and was mouthing the words “Bloody Hell” over and over again. Unfortunately, the noise woke Mrs. Black’s portrait, which proceeded to add to the cacophony. Lisa and Kevin were now on the steps

listening to the goings on and Hannah looked mortified by the chain of events her question had triggered.

It was into this scene that the front door opened and in walked Kingsley Shacklebolt and Neville Longbottom.

## Chapter 7 – Percy: The other white meat.

Aches and pain greeted the Darkest Wizard of recent history as he dressed himself. He had been forced into rash actions before he had fully recovered and now he was paying the price. Physically, he had recovered. Mentally, he was as sharp as ever. Magically, he was not. His magical core was still in what could only be termed as a pathetic state. Immediately upon his rebirth, he had foolishly dueled with the whelp. His core had but a meager amount of energy in it. The real damage had been done by the *Priori Incantem* effect. It drew power from the wands and the casters to create its effect. That severely overextended his newly reborn body. It was a sad state of affairs that he spent most of the previous year recuperating and reduced to playing ridiculous mind games with his teenaged nemesis. He glared at himself in the dressing mirror.

“No, couldn’t just walk over and slit his cursed throat, could you? Had to be arrogant! Surely no mere child could expect to out duel Lord Voldemort! Well now look at you. You were barely able to take out Amelia Bones you weak disgusting wretch!”

He stared menacingly at his image in the mirror. The angry expression on his face would make all his followers, well except for Bella, cringe. She would just get that crazy smile on her face, even if it was directed at her. Sadly, he sighed, that was the state of things, his most loyal follower had only half her oars in the water. Of course the other half was poised to bash someone’s head in. Most of his followers harbored delusions of succeeding him as the next Dark Lord, Bella simply wanted to kill. She was a beautiful, elegant, feral killing machine. Merlin, love that crazy bitch! Lucius, by contrast feared him, but he could see the ambition burning behind Malfoy’s grey eyes. He would probably have to deal with Malfoy the elder before the final battle. ‘Perhaps a suicide mission, or maybe he would pit his own son or wife against him.’ He mused. His boy is almost of age and it would be time to mark either him or Narcissa. The choice was obvious. The boy would be a grunt with ambition to spare, but lacking the cunning to properly wield it. Narcissa on the other hand was devious and sly in her own right. Behind every great man is a woman using him for all he’s worth. Lady Malfoy would remain unmarked, because she was already a useful ally. Her son in his

ranks would ensure her continued cooperation. Besides, he could hardly expect their offspring to not do anything foolish that will end him in Azkaban or dead before he graduates from school – might as well get some use out of him.

“Ah yes. Time for the shepherd to guide his loyal flock.” He said grabbing for a portkey to take him to his headquarters.

He arrived in his command center to be greeted by Peter. The rat was looking rather tired and the Dark Lord saw the telltale signs of his injuries. Peter, however, simply smiled at him. A new aura of confidence surrounded the wretched little animagus.

“I do believe there are no Goldsteins or Smiths left to offend you. The only Longbottoms left wander around a hospital ward while their spawn lies bloated at the bottom of a pond. I hope you are pleased Master.” His lackey said with a gleam in his eyes.

“Very good news indeed Worm- ah Peter.” He had started to use the same derogatory term he always used, but paused deciding to refer to the man in front of him by his given name. He saw Peter straighten noticeably. In his mind the Dark Lord thought, “Obviously a bit too much stick and not enough carrot. Let us see what the new and improved Peter Pettigrew can accomplish.”

“Thank you my lord.”

“Were any of my loyal subjects lost?”

“The only one who has not checked in from my team is Harold Travers. I have sent his brother to his house to look for him. Colson’s team reported no casualties but several injuries. They are being looked over by the mediwizard right now my lord.”

“Have you seen Severus?”

“No Master. He is most likely at Hogwarts. Rudolphus also has not reported in. Bellatrix has expressed her concern for his welfare. I have not heard from the rest of your team milord.”

Voldemort started thinking. Rudolphus, Severus and two others were still there when he had been forced to withdraw. Surely Potter and the girl would not have stood a chance. He began to dismiss it when a tiny voice in his mind reminded him of the portion of the prophecy he knew already. The boy does have power. Is it possible that he managed to beat them?

"Have one of our people at the ministry listen for the results of the attacks. I need to know what the ministry knows, immediately!"

"Yes milord." Peter spun and quickly left the room.

The Dark Lord settled into the center chair around a circular table. His own "round table" if you wished. The table itself was a clever design by Pettigrew. It was based off of something he and the fools he betrayed put together as children. It was a map of the entire town of where this mansion resided in. This map would show the movement and names of all the people in the mansion and surrounding town. Quite a bit of ingenious work by Peter, the Dark Lord mused. It was regrettable to know that Potter possessed the original map detailing Hogwarts. In hindsight he should have warned Crouch Jr. to simply destroy it rather than confiscate it, but in retrospect he had already planned to use the map when he assaulted Hogwarts.

Bellatrix made her way into the command chamber. She was in her everyday wear. It was a pity. He had actually rather enjoyed making Bella play "dress up". She had cleaned up rather nicely.

"Master, do you know where my oaf of a husband is? I promised him pain and suffering if he failed you. Is he hiding from me?" She asked arching her eyebrow as she took the smaller chair directly on Voldemort's right hand side. This indicated her position as her lord's "right hand". The left-hand seat was currently vacant and would normally be filled with the arrogant figure of Lucius Malfoy.

"I do not know at this moment. Peter is sending someone to the ministry and I expect Severus here soon. We shall know them."

Bellatrix looked confused. Between the Dark Lord, Severus, Rudolphus and the others they should have easily overpowered any resistance. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair directly, wanting

answers, but not willing to anger her master to get them. Instead she studied the map of the mansion, watching the dots move about. She watched the dot labeled Severus Snape form at the apparation point and begin moving down the corridor heading for the central chamber.

"Milord, Severus approaches." She said quietly.

"Good then we shall have our answers."

Severus briskly walked down the corridor. His debriefing with the headmaster had taken longer than he had thought. Combined with the fact that last night's mission was strategically a draw - with no clear-cut victor, his tardiness left him with a slight sense of dread. He was interested in the Dark Lord's reaction to the news. If any single entity bore responsibility for the disaster it would be Voldemort himself.

"Can't exactly punish yourself now can you?" The potion master thought to himself.

"Ah, Severus, welcome back. We seem to be missing quite a few members of the team that went with me last night. Would you care to enlighten me?" Voldemort ask in a calm voice.

"Where is Rudolphus?" Bella asked rather tersely.

"Milord, after you left. The Potter brat managed to stun me while I was dealing with the girl. Two of the new recruits were captured by the aurors and Rudolphus dueled with Potter. The boy was able to kill Rudolphus."

"What!" Bellatrix screamed. Severus could not have just said what she thought he had said. Ickle baby Potter could not have destroyed "her property"! Rudolphus was fairly skilled as a dueler, nowhere near her league, but still competent enough in a fight. Her eyes glazed over. Had anyone been looking at her, they would have seen a terrifying sight as her face contorted through a wide range of emotions; shock, anger, resentment, hatred, sweet murderous hatred. Her left hand began to twitch uncontrollably. She needed to kill someone, the sooner the better. The more violent the death, the better in fact.

“Interesting.” Voldemort said drawing a slightly hostile look from his deranged companion. “So the boy who lived can be a killer if needed. I am curious about Dumbledore’s reaction to this revelation.”

“The boy is mine! I will kill him! I will flay every inch of skin from his body and douse him in alcohol. I will wear the bones of his fingers as a necklace! He will suffer! He will beg me to just kill him.”

“Bella! Control yourself! Severus do you have a calming draught? Excellent. Bella, take this and retire to your chambers. We will speak more on this later. Go now!”

Severus watched as Bella, who was for all intents and purpose foaming at the mouth, drink the potion and storm away from the table. One of the newer recruits was entering the chamber as she was leaving. She grabbed the man suddenly, kneeing him in the crotch and driving her elbow into the small of his back. He collapsed onto the hardwood floors and she kicked him three times in his chest, before continuing on her way. The man staggered to his feet spitting up blood on the floor. Once on his feet he gasped for breath and turned to head presumably to the medical bay.

‘I see she is taking this well.’ Snape thought to himself before continuing. “The headmaster confronted Potter at the auror headquarters. They exchanged words, but other than the boy’s anger fuelling some wild magic, there was no repeat of his infantile display from last month. Dumbledore expressed concerns that the boy could turn dark if left uncontrolled. The boy is beginning to chafe at the restrictions he is living under. These confrontations are creating much friction between the two and that could prevent them from presenting a united front against you.”

“Yes. I can see where that may be exploited to our advantage. I will ponder on this. In the meantime, I will need your assistance with several complex potions. I must have all of them in three days time. Here are the recipes.” He handed Severus an ancient tome.

Severus was surprised at the complexity of the potions, from what little he knew of the three, they were for dark necromantic rituals. “I will begin work without delay, Master!” Severus bowed and excused himself, heading for his potion lab cloak billowing in his wake.



Voldemort watched his potion master leave and pondered his next move. He would need to send an owl to his goddaughter requesting that she and her husband come for a visit. It was regrettable that he could no longer wait for his chances to be arithmetically more likely to be successful. Alas, neither time nor immortality would wait much longer. He snatched some parchment and scribbled the instructions for his goddaughter and gave it to one of his lackeys to owl it away.

“Looks as if the circus is in town. Do you agree Neville?” Kingsley Shacklebolt asked as they surveyed the chaos in the room surrounding them. Neville just nodded.

By the kitchen table Mrs. Weasley was berating Harry about fighting Death Eaters. Her daughter looked both shocked and furious. Her son was shaking his head and muttering while getting himself a glass of water. Emmeline Vance looked on in amusement. Three other teenaged girls were huddling on the opposite side of the room. The older blond looked terrified about something and her red haired friend was questioning her and consoling her. The youngest girl was simply staring at Harry with awe. Through the doorway the auror could see that two more teenagers were at the second floor landing listening with interest. Finally the auror's eyes settled on the form of Albus Dumbledore, who seemed immune to the chaos that surround him as he idly fished a small yellow candy out of his robes and placed it in his mouth.

Harry was taking Mrs. Weasley's tirade in stride. He had been mentally preparing himself all morning for what he had considered the inevitable outburst. Hannah's offhand comment triggered the event earlier than he had hoped, as he had been hoping to at least make it through dinner. He genuinely loved Molly Weasley and knew deep down she was acting from her heart, but Harry had already determined that he wasn't going to take verbal abuse from Albus Dumbledore then he certainly wasn't going to take it from anyone else.

“Enough!” Harry said cutting her off in mid-sentence and the room suddenly became awfully quiet. “I had a choice and I made it. It was a question of right or easy. It would have been easy just to do nothing, let them capture Susan and hope for the best. Maybe they weren't

going to hurt her – too much.” He looked at Dumbledore during the “right or easy” part. Susan felt Hannah tense as Harry discussed the Death Eater’s plans to capture her.

“But Harry you’re so young,” Molly started switching tactics. You don’t raise a large family without having several different approaches to difficult children.

“Yes I am young. I shouldn’t have to do this, but I do. This scar connects me to him. You know I see what he is doing. I watch him torture people. I watch him kill. I see people on their knees begging for their life and promising him anything. I even see a few who die refusing to give him the satisfaction. I owe it to all those people to do something!”

“That’s what the Aurors are for Harry. I know you want to be one, but you need to finish your schooling. Now is just not your time to fight.”

“You are so wrong! It was my time to fight when I was 11 and had to kill Quirell. It was my time to fight when I had to go face the Basilisk down in the chamber. It was my time to fight when Crouch entered me into the Triwizard tournament. How many Dark Lords have you fought Mrs. Weasley? How many bodies have you seen lately? I’ve fought him and seen four dead bodies since last night. One by my own hand! Do I want to be a killer? No I don’t, but it seems that is my gift.”

Molly Weasley faltered under Harry’s counter attack. The room, which had been in an uproar previously, was unusually quiet now. Harry’s eyes blazed righteously. Most of the teens in the room were wide eyed at Harry’s last declaration. The adults were more introspective. Harry shook his head, turned and headed for the steps. The voice of the headmaster interrupted the silence.

“You can not save them all Harry. This is war. People will die.” The wizened mage said.

Harry halted turning his head slowly to look upon his former mentor, a man he had looked up to for almost his entire time at Hogwarts. He felt the fresh sting of their argument at the auror headquarters.

“You can’t expect me not to try, sir.” Harry growled in reply before marching right past the astonished Turpins. Everyone waited for the sound of a slamming bedroom door, but strangely enough it never came.

Albus Dumbledore sighed lost in his own thoughts as he recalled a similar conversation between a more idealistic and headstrong wizard and his mentor, Nicolas Flammel during what the muggles called World War I. The main difference was that he had been a fully trained wizard already having lived over 50 years.

In a whisper that no one other than he could hear Dumbledore said, “No, I suppose I can not.”

Slowly people started to move about the room again. Ron walked over to welcome Neville. The Turpins came down into the kitchen. Susan and the Abbott sisters sat at the table. Susan watched Ginny for a moment as the youngest Weasley fought an internal battle trying to decide whether or not to go upstairs after Harry. Her decision made, she started to go up the stairs, when her mother warned her to wait a few minutes and give Harry some space. Mrs. Weasley started to work in the kitchen, but Susan’s house elf appeared and asked her what she needed. This clearly left Molly out of sorts, being rather unused to having the luxury of a house elf. Kingsley, Emmeline and Albus went into the parlor.

“Hannah, do you and Chelsea want to room with me and Lisa? Well come on then lets go finish setting up the room.” Susan said standing up from the table.

She led her friends up the stairway and into the room, which already had two sets of bunk beds installed courtesy of Ms. Vance. Susan and Lisa had already claimed the bottom bunks. Hannah opted to sleep above her best friend. After a minute Susan started out the door.

“Where do you think you are going Bonsey?” Her friend asked using the hated nickname.

“A – Don’t call me that. B- Someone should really check on Harry. C- The loo is just around the corner.”

Susan closed the door behind her missing the looks of speculation on Hannah and Chelsea's faces. Both turned and smiled slyly at each other. The Abbot sisters were unusually perceptive. There was some thought that they might have some slight empathic abilities.

Chelsea smiled at her sister; "It's not a question of how bad she has got it. The real question is does she know how bad she's got it?"

"I will have to let Justin know as soon as we can send owls. Oh boy, I just thought of something!"

"What?"

"I have Miss 'Someone should really check on Harry' in the next girlfriend pool!"

"Wow really, I bet on Chang. I thought I sensed something there."

"No by the end of the term, they were going out of their way to avoid each other."

"Did you see the Glare of Death Ginny Weasley was giving Susan?" Chelsea laughed making a catfight sound while clawing at the air.

They were giggling when Lisa walked in the room. "What is so funny?" The petite Ravenclaw asked arching an eyebrow.

"Susan's a bit taken with our hero in residence. We are not sure if she knows it yet though." Hannah answered. "I am glad that I picked her in the pool!"

Lisa smiled thinking of her own selection. "Don't count your galleons until Hermoine gets here though. I did notice that Susan immediately looked up from the book she wasn't really reading when Harry and my little brother came down from seeing the hippogriff in the attic."

"This place has a hippogriff in the attic! Cool!"

"Uh, yes it does. Susan can probably show you or maybe Harry, if he is in a better mood. It's not really my thing."

Susan knocked on Harry's door before opening it. "Harry, are you okay?"

"Oh, yeah, I suppose. Come on in."

Harry sat on his bed with two books and a muggle spiral notebook in front of him. Susan was also shocked to see him using a ballpoint pen. She had half expected to see him hitting something. Instead he was calmly taking notes.

"I thought you might be upset or something."

"Not really. I knew pretty much how that was going to go, so I was prepared. I figured I would come up here and work on the DA notes." He noticed Susan looking at his pen. "Sometimes the wizarding world is so backwards. I heard on the telly how the muggles make a pen that will write upside down and in outer space."

Susan being a pureblood with little exposure to the non-wizarding world did not understand a word he had just said. She merely smiled and nodded her head.

"So what are you working on?"

"Just a rough outline of the first few lessons for the DA. I figured we could start with some offensive spells and some of the specialized shields. To really do those, we will need to work on spell recognition. You have to know what your opponent is going to cast to raise the right shield. I thought about asking Madame Pomfrey to show us some basic healing. Do you think she would?"

"I don't know. You seem to spend enough time with her, so she might think you are sweet on her or something." Susan added with a grin. "Hmmm. I wonder what Madame Pomfrey's odds were in that girlfriend pool. I could make a killing."

"Ha, ha very funny. For someone coming to cheer me up you seem to be having a good laugh at my expense."

"Well, you seem to be fine." She responded sticking her tongue out at him and sitting on the edge of his bed.

They were chatting quietly for another five minutes when there was a soft knock at the door.

"Harry? Are you okay in there?"

"Oh sure come on in Ginny!" Harry replied as the petite redhead stepped into the room.

"I just wanted to make sure ..." Her voice trailed off at seeing Susan sitting on Harry's bed. She coughed slightly and started again. "I just wanted to make sure that mum didn't rattle you too much."

"No. I have already had it out with Dumbledore. I didn't let him get to me. No offense, but your mother doesn't compare."

"Oh. So what are you doing up here?" Ginny sat down right next to him.

"Well Susan and I were going over some of the things I wanted to show the DA next year. Here take a look." He said handing her the notebook.

Susan couldn't put her finger on exactly why she was annoyed with Ginny Weasley. Over the next few days she began to have little daydreams of horrible things happening to the only Weasley daughter. She would practically smother Harry whenever she was around. To make matters worse, she kept mentioning how she had been exchanging letters with Dean Thomas. Worst of all, Harry seemed to be noticing the little trollop. Not that Susan should care mind you, but Harry clearly deserved some less demanding, less smothering, less Ginny Weasley like. When she mentioned her concerns to Hannah, her best friend started laughing at her of all things. When Susan demanded to know what was so funny, Hannah simply said that Susan would have to figure it out for herself.

Susan had hoped things would improve when Hermoine Granger arrived. It was not to be. Immediately after she arrived, Ginny had bodily dragged Hermoine up to the bedroom she was sharing with the recently arrived Mandy Brocklehurst. The boys had also expanded into a second bedroom with the addition of Terry Boot and two second years whom Susan didn't know. There was some talk that

they might go ahead and move the “refugees” to Hogwarts early and put them up in one of the dorms. The house had been magically expanded to the limits of Dobby and Trixie’s capabilities. Susan had never seen Trixie working so hard before. There were no further arguments between the two elves, as their workload had dramatically increased. She made it a point to compliment Trixie on several occasions. Harry seemed to approve, but Hermione had lectured her about house elf rights.

The other person, who became extremely popular as the crowd continued to grow, was Kevin Turpin. The young Hufflepuff had brought along a vast collection of modified muggle board games, which he and his sister had charmed. Fred and George Weasley had taken an interest in some of them and were working out a marketing deal with them. The Turpin modification of Clue – The Hogwarts edition quickly overtook gobstones and losing to Ron Weasley at chess as the recreational activity of choice at the noble house of Black. The goal was to find out who had murdered a certain potion’s master. It would be a hot seller for the back to school season and on into the Christmas holiday.

Hagrid. In the Astronomy Tower. With the sword of Gryffindor!”

“Nope. Sorry mate. Better luck next time.”

Professor Dumbledore had stopped in and observed a rather lively game. Though he could not in good faith endorse a game, whose premise involved the murder of one of his staff, but he could not resist making his own guess.

“I would hazard a guess that the true culprit is Harry Potter in Ms Myrtle’s bathroom using the sorting hat.”

Percy Weasley woke to a throbbing headache. He was in an unfamiliar room in the same clothes he was in last night. His wand was no where to be found and most alarming neither was his pregnant wife Penelope. His last memory was sitting down to dinner with her last night after a very tiring day at the ministry. The power void in the wake of Fudge’s departure and the inability to get a replacement in effect left a small cabal of department heads and

himself running the ministry. Penny had been incredibly supportive with all the ensuing late nights.

"He's awake." A voice from outside the door said.

"Our orders are to bring him to the master."

Percy sucked in his breath as two death eaters entered the room. "Great, no wand. You're in deep shit Percy!" He had no weapons at his disposal and doubted that his captors would be so kind to provide him with one.

"Move, Weasley. Don't do anything stupid and you will get to see your little wife again."

The words caused Percy to pale slightly. He had hoped that they didn't have Penny. She had been the sole support during his estrangement from his family - his pillar of strength. When it had turned out that Fudge had been wrong and the Dark Lord had in fact returned, Percy had been ready to crawl back to his family and beg for their forgiveness. Penny had stopped him. She had persuaded him to wait until things had calmed a bit before attempting reconciliation. She had wanted to wait until their child was born. It made perfect sense in a way. She had encouraged him to join that dueling club. If he were able to get his hand on a wand he would show these pitiful minions some real dueling. He would protect his wife and child. He still recalled the night he made an unbreakable vow to do everything in his power to protect the child.

He walked down a hallway with his death eater escort. They gestured towards a room and instructed him to enter. Inside was a dining room with three place settings. He saw Penny standing looking out a window. He rushed to her and gathered his wife into a strong embrace.

"Penny! Are you okay? Have they been mistreating you? We will need to watch for our chance to make an escape. No matter what, I will get you and our baby out of here."



The opposite door opened Lord Voldemort walked into the room. "Such noble sentiments, young Percival. You Gryffindors are so predictable."

Percy recovered quickly hissing, "What do you want?"

"My, my! Not much fear. Or at least, you rise to defend your mate. Primal instincts to protect your wife and child are very powerful motivations. I shall humor you Percy Weasley. What I want is your participation in a ritual. It is a very dark ritual and quite dangerous for the both of us. I admit it is much more dangerous for you than I, but I must be concerned for my welfare as well."

"Never! I will not help you!"

"Then I am afraid I will simply have to kill dear Penelope and your unborn." Penny gasped clutching Percy's arm.

"If you cooperate, I may be inclined to spare them. In fact for your cooperation, I would be willing to give a Wizard's oath that neither I nor any of my followers will willingly harm your wife or child except in self-defense. I can't give young Penelope carte blanche to attack me now can I?"

"Percy. You can't!" Penny gasped. "Don't even think about it!"

"Love, I swore I would do anything to protect you and the baby. If this is the cost to ensure your and our babies survival, what kind of husband would I be to not do everything in my power." He said holding her close and kissing her forehead. "Very well. On my life and magic, I will participate in your ritual, provided you swear an Oath preventing harm to my wife and unborn child." He said feeling the tingle of magic through his body.

"Well spoken, my brave lad. On my life and magic, I will not harm nor direct harm to come to Penelope Clearwater-Weasley or her child. Myself and my followers may only defend ourselves if need be." Voldemort said triggering an unmistakable aura around him. "There, now that the formalities are through with, perhaps you and your lovely wife would be interested in a fine meal?" He asked looking him over with his narrowed red eyes.

Percy cautiously pulled a chair out for his wife and after seating her, he joined her at the dining table. Lord Voldemort smiled and sat in his chair. Instantly, the dishes in front of them filled with roast mutton and steamed vegetables. A bottle of wine uncorked itself and poured a glass for each of them. Percy waited until the Voldemort tasted the wine.

“Oh please Percy! Do you think I would waste my time with an oath if I were going to poison you? Perhaps I am giving you too much credit.”

Percy glared at him defiantly and drank from his wineglass. Reluctantly, he admitted that it was an excellent vintage.

“So what do I need to know of this ritual?”

“Oh, no small talk then. I had hoped we could discuss how the ministry was coping with recent events, but alas I guess not. Very well, then. How are you at Arithmancy?”

“Quite good, actually. Full marks!”

“Ah yes. I should expect nothing less. First a bit of background, did you know that you and I were both born on July 7<sup>th</sup>? The seventh day of the seventh month how profound is it not? In fact you were born exactly 49 years after my own birth, which is of course seven multiplied by seven. Arithmetically, that in itself is significant.”

Percy listened, but was unable to grasp his meaning, “Interesting facts and wonderful trivia, but I fail to see your point.”

“Still defiant, eh? Normally, I would pause a moment to teach you to hold your tongue with pain the likes of which you could not fathom, but I see no reason to foolishly harm what you have to offer me.”

“And just what pray do tell am I offering as part of your foul ritual?”

“Oh, not much, simply your magical core. I will rip it from your body and merge it with my own to repair the damage that had been done to it. I had hoped to wait until next year when you were 21 or three times seven years to further improve my percentages, but alas the recent

events have caused me to play my hand earlier than I had hoped. It will be painful for the both of us, again you more so than I. It will in all likelihood kill you outright, but there is a slim possibility that you could live as a squib. There is even a miniscule chance that the magical backlash will kill me as well."

"One can only hope," Percy muttered hoping the powers that be could hear his unspoken plea.

"Ah yes, but the risks outweigh the rewards. Part of this journey to power that I am on, requires that I be bold, when the opportunity arises. Carpe diem – Seize the day!"

As they continued the meal, something began to bother Percy. Something other than the fact the Dark Lord wanted to rip his magic from him in some vile ritual. Penelope was far to calm. Initially he thought she was in shock from encountering Voldemort (might as well think it if he is going to him), but she seemed to be merrily working her way through dinner, even replying politely when Voldemort asked how her pregnancy was coming along.

"Penny, my dear, why do I feel that I am not privy to something." He glared at the woman, who had been his one constant during the last year and a half. He scowled as Voldemort laughed.

"Oh please, do tell him Penelope. The oaths have already been said, there is no backing out. The boy deserves the truth and I can use the entertainment."

"Very well, godfather."

"Godfather!"

"Yes Percy. He is my Godfather." Penny said dabbing her chin with her napkin.

"But how? You're muggleborn! This can't be!"

"Do you remember the summer after our sixth year, when I interned for the Ministry? I know we were on a break from each other back then. I was assigned to the birthing records office. On a whim I looked

up my name and what do I find, but an entry that says Antonin Dolohov is my real father. You could well imagine my shock.”

Percy wanted to say something, but found he could only move his mouth making not a sound.

“It took me several months to track him down and he considered killing me straight away, but I won my daddy over. Father introduced me to his master and asked him to be my godparent.” There was a gleam in her eyes he had never seen before. There was a sinking feeling in his gut that; the woman he slept beside every night had used him.

“Using my access, I was able to give father the information he needed to give to Godfather. He needed to know the names of children born on specific dates. Low and behold, my ex-boyfriend fit the bill to a tee. I still had to get back together with you, but as you well know I am very good at getting what I want. With you back in my life, I needed to get your oath and help you develop your magical core.”

“Well done on both counts.” Voldemort said refilling his wineglass and admiring the color in the light.

Percy stuttered. “Then th-then this was all a lie. The marriage! Our-Our love! Everything?”

“Oh dear no, silly. We really are married and you have been a model husband. I have been very pleased with you. I have been particularly pleased with all your hard work at the dueling club. Your magical core has become so much stronger.”

“So that is what all about! Fatten the pig for a slaughter! Make me strong as an offering for him!” His eyes tried to burn a hole through her.

“You were most cooperative by distancing yourself from your family. They could have been a significant problem.” She gave him a dazzling smile.

“Only because I listened to you! Even if you do have a Death Eater for a father, you are still a halfblood. How do you expect to fit in to the pureblood society?”

“I will handle this one my dear. Percy, would you be surprised to learn that I am a halfblood. This pureblood agenda is useful to me as keeping you working hard and estranged from your family was to Penny. Individuals and groups alike can be controlled so easily if you have the proper motivation. In fact, show me ten random ‘purebloods’ and I will show you five who are correct, three who think they are correct, but do not know about skeletons in their lineage and two that are lying outright. Actually, I suspect, but do not have the data to support my theories, that there are far less muggleborns and many more halfbloods. I for one know my followers like to indulge in a bit of entertainment with the locals. A little Imperio here and a bit of oblivation there. I wouldn’t be too shocked to learn how many illegitimate children are walking the halls of Hogwarts this year. Well, enough of the pleasantries, since you are oathbound to prevent harm to your wife or child, I will give you the next hour to say your goodbye. Then, I am afraid I will have to consume your magic, but look at it this way, what young wizard doesn’t dream of their magic conquering all? In this case your magic will help, sadly you just won’t be there to see it.”

Harry had to get up the pain in his head could be felt all the way down to his shoulders. He only had nightmarish bits and pieces from his most recent vision. He could only hear disembodied voices and sense waves of nausea mixed with pain. Feeling absolutely wretched, he staggered past the worried looks of his roommates to the bathroom. There he vomited until his stomach contained no more and dry heaved a good minute more after that. The other bedroom doors had opened and both Hannah and Susan could be seen in their doorway. From the floor above Hermoine and Ginny were descending the steps.

Hermoine shot a look down to Ron who stood out in the hallway. “Is he okay, Ron?”

The youngest Weasley male shook his head slowly from side to side. "Whatever it was, it must have been pretty bad. I haven't seen it get to him like that in a long time."

Ron entered the bathroom and grabbed a washcloth. Wetting it, he helped his best friend clean himself off. Despite it being rather warm, Harry's arm had goosebumps on it and he shivered noticeably. Harry nodded wearily to Ron, while wiping the last vestiges of vomit from his chin.

"Kevin, you and Neville go on back to bed. The rest of you, the show is over. Harry will be fine. Just give him some space." Ron said in his best drill sergeant voice showing his experience of years of practice dealing with the aftermath of Harry's numerous visions.

Harry caught Susan's eye before she closed the door. He gave her a very faint smile of reassurance as he leaned slightly on Ron to steady himself. She nodded back before closing the bedroom door. Hermione had finished coming down the steps and gathered Harry into a hug. The only noticeable sign of discomfort on her part was a slight wrinkling of her nose at the lingering stench.

"We should take you down to the kitchen and let the guard know what is going on." She said with sympathy instead of the usual bossiness she was known for. "I am here for you if you want to talk about it."

He felt Ginny's feather light touch on his forearm. "We are all here for you Harry. Don't forget that." With that, she flashed a smile at him and turned to head back upstairs.

Ron chuckled, "That's right mate! Can't scare us away even if you have flobberworm breath. Come on. I'll take you down and grab you a glass of milk to get rid of the taste." He said extracting Hermione from Harry and leading him down to the kitchen. In Harry's slightly disoriented state he did not notice the slight squeeze Ron gave Hermione on the shoulder before shooing her back up the stairs.

When they reached the kitchen, Harry sat at the table and Ron grabbed two cups and poured some milk from the chillbox. Charlie was on guard this evening and he looked on with a bit of concern.

“Do you need me to floo for someone Harry? Sounded like you had a rough go of it.”

Harry looked at the clock on the wall as he sipped the milk. It was quarter to three. He concentrated on his thoughts trying to assemble them into something coherent that he could explain. After a minute of pure concentration, he relented and shook his head no.

“No if I could remember something more from it, then I would say yes, but right now all I can say is that I heard some voices, felt a lot of pain and got sick. If Dumbledore checks in with you, tell him, but if not wait for morning. No sense in ruining more people’s night sleep.”

Ron had finished his glass and put it back into the sink. He walked over and patted Harry’s shoulder. “Do you want me to stay up with you?” Harry’s answer was pretty much a foregone conclusion.

“No go on back up. I will stay down here with Charlie for a bit. Could you toss that book on my nightstand down to me? I can do a bit of reading before breakfast.”

True to his word, Ron tossed the Auror training manual down to him. Harry opened to the section on shielding strategies and started to read. Charlie was happy enough for the company on what had been up to now a very long shift. They made small talk for about thirty minutes.

“Are you nervous about tomorrow?” Charlie asked.

“No, just not really looking forward to hearing Sirius’s will be read. It feels like once they read it, that it is over. He is not coming back. It’s so final! Susan is taking it pretty hard over her mother and aunt. She has to hear their wills tomorrow. I just don’t want everyone to be ignoring her while they are busy trying to cheer me up.”

“I understand Harry. Last time around I was just a kid - only about eight years old. I couldn’t understand the war. I asked Mom when I was going to get to see Uncle Gideon again and she just started bawling. The few times I have been around a dementor, I hear her crying like that.”

Harry nodded respectfully. Most wizards and witches were lucky enough never to be around such creatures. Those that are not so lucky will rarely mention it. An even smaller percentage will actually mention what they hear or felt during an encounter. For the dragon handler to just casually mention it in conversation with him implied a great trust in that Harry would never use that information. It ranked up right up there with telling people what shape your boggart took. To some it was even more private, because people can see the form of a boggart; they cannot hear or feel the silent terror that rends your soul.

"I hear my mother's last words before Voldemort killed her."

Charlie grimaced at Harry's revelation. "In that case, if you ever get the bastard in your wand arc, don't hesitate. Don't feel any remorse. Don't wonder if there is any good left in him. Finish him. Every once in a while at the reserve, we get a dragon that goes rogue. It's never a pretty sight. You've seen one close up to know how terrifyingly powerful one is. When that happens, we ride out at least eight to a group and we don't hold back. One way or another it gets put down. Same deal, Harry. Put him down like a wild animal. If Hagrid was here he would tell you the same thing."

"You're right. I hope Hagrid is okay. I know he is trying to marshal support in the giant community. That's a tough job for anyone."

"Well if he is smart, he will let Olympe do all the talking and he will protect her. Why don't you go back up to sleep? You will need to be well rested for today."

Harry nodded and clasped hands with the stocky member of the Weasley clan. He turned to start upstairs when something on the floor caught his eye. On the ground directly in front of the Weasley family clock was a black hand. Harry sucked his breath in as he grabbed it from the ground and showed Charlie. Both quickly scanned the face and after a moment turned to look at one another.

"Shit! Percy!" Charlie muttered.

"Should we wake everyone?" Harry asked.



“No. Today will be bad enough as it is. Mom, Dad, Ron and Ginny deserve a chance to rest. Waking them up right now won’t change a bloody thing! I will wait until five or six to floo call Bill and the twins. I hope they can get here before Mom gets up.”

Charlie sat back down at the table looking as if he wanted to hit it hard, but not wanting to make noise. He stared at the wall for a minute or was it five. When he finally shook himself out of his stupor, he noticed Harry sitting back at the table reading from his book.

“You really should go up and lie down.”

“No chance. I didn’t get along with him, but he was a Weasley and every single one of you has pretty much adopted me. You don’t need to be down here by yourself.”

Charlie smiled at Harry and was impressed. In front of him sat an almost sixteen year old with for all intents and purpose, a price on his head. Charlie had heard him screaming and spewing his guts upstairs during the vision of what were most likely Percy’s final moments. It was at that moment that he realized the true meaning of having Harry Potter as your friend and pseudo brother.

“Since I didn’t know him that well, why don’t you tell me some of the good stories about Percy to pass the time. Sirius told me his motto about death once. ‘Remember the good. Forget the bad. Sell everything not nailed down!’ It seems a bit late, but tell me about our brother.”

## Chapter 8 – End of the Line

The morning brought with it a cold heartache for the Weasley family. Charlie had contacted both Bill and the twins, who arrived shortly before six in the morning. Each of them stared at the family clock for a brief moment, hoping that in some way they could convince themselves that their wayward brother was still alive. Harry noted how quiet the normally rambunctious twins were as they sat drinking some coffee. The mirth ever present in their eyes now replaced with a somber almost unreadable expression.

“I will go upstairs and wake Mum and Dad. After they get down here and we have had a chance to let it sink in, we can go get Ron and Ginny.” Bill said quietly. “Harry, can you keep everyone in the kitchen and we will take Mum and Dad into the parlor? It is a bit more private in there.”

“Sure Bill, whatever you need.” Harry answered.

Minutes later, Bill led his parents down the stairs and into the parlor. Molly looked confused. Arthur already suspected something was wrong. His expression was pale and his head hung low.

Shortly after Bill closed the door, the sounds of a mother’s agony could be heard. It was cut short by a privacy charm. Harry got up from the table and assisted the house elves with breakfast preparations. The simple housework was therapeutic in a way, however his weariness was tangible. The will reading was scheduled for noon. Hopefully, he could catch a few moments of rest after breakfast, but keeping Charlie company had been more important.

The door opened and Charlie came back out. He was shaking his head slowly from side to side. The stocky redhead looked at him. “Harry show me where Ginny’s room is. After that lets go ahead and wake Ron up.”

The journey from the kitchen to the girl’s bedroom never seemed so long. He motioned to the door and Charlie squeezed his shoulder before quietly opening the door and entering. Harry gathered his courage to go back to his bedroom and wake Ron up.

Ron was sleeping soundly as Harry shook him. It took about a minute before Ron started to groan. "What's wrong Harry more dreams?"

"No Ron. You need to get up and go downstairs."

Ron heard the pain in Harry's voice. "What is it? Tell me!"

"The dream last night, it was Percy. I am sorry Ron. Come on Bill and the twins are downstairs. They just broke it to your parents. Charlie is getting Ginny."

Harry watched as Ron dressed almost mechanically. He followed Ron out the door seeing Charlie lead a worried looking Ginny down the stairs. It was obvious that she did not know yet. Immediately, she grabbed Ron when she saw his expression.

"What is it? Is it George, Fred or Bill?" She asked loudly. Charlie started to shush her, but she would not be deterred. "Oh no it's Percy! Isn't it?"

Seeing the expression on Ron's face was the acknowledgement that she needed as she began to cry loudly. Harry let the trio descend. As he heard the signs that the other refugees had awakened.

For the next twenty minutes Harry was besieged with questions from the Abbott sisters, the Turpins, Neville and Hermione. He did his best to fend them off by telling them that it was not his information to share and to give the Weasleys some time and space. In the meantime he led those who were interested down for breakfast. He noticed a very tired looking Susan had joined them. She did not appear to have slept much either.

The house elves set breakfast for group. Most of them cast anxious glances at the parlor door, which once again had a privacy charm erected. The teens poked and prodded at their breakfast.

Suddenly, the door opened. An agonized looking Ginny Weasley stood there with tears running down her face. The teenager looked positively distraught. She glared at Harry.

"Why couldn't you save him?"

Of all the things Ginny could have asked, this was not something Harry would have anticipated.

"I don't know."

"You were able to portkey to her house." She said glaring at Susan who visibly flinched.

Harry was on the defensive. For what he wasn't sure. "The wards at the house were down! I could sense where they were. Last night I couldn't."

"Sure whatever!" Ginny said dismissing him. "Maybe if Percy was a good for nothing slut like her, you would have saved him!"

Susan's glass fell from her hands and shattered on the ground. Her eyes bulged in shock.

"Ginny! How could you say such a thing?" Hermione said amazed at the rancor in her friend's statement.

"What the hell? Ginny, I know you are upset, but this is downright insulting."

"Oh I see. Not playing the hero today. This must be woe is me I am a victim day!"

Every person at the table stared open mouthed at the hysterical redhead. Hermione stood up and went over to hug Ginny. The privacy ward seemed to prevent her family from hearing her outburst. Susan bolted up the stairs already starting to cry. Hannah contemplated how much trouble she would get into for hexing Ginny into oblivion.

Harry walked over to where Hermione was holding Ginny. "Harry. She's upset. I am sure she didn't mean any of it." He was still trying to wrap his mind around what had just happened when Ginny shook out of her friend's embrace and smacked him across his face as hard as she possibly could.

"Why didn't you save him? Its all your fault!"

By this time the rest of the Weasleys had noticed Ginny's behavior and had entered the kitchen. Her mother immediately grabbed hold of her. Harry looked at Hermione, who could only offer an exasperated look of sympathy.

Harry turned away, not wanting to add fuel to Ginny's tantrum. Instead, this seemed to give her the justification she needed to launch her most viscous insult.

"No wonder you got Sirius killed."

"Ginny! How dare you say that?" Molly immediately scolded her. "Harry, she doesn't mean any of this. Bill get her a calming draught."

Harry's face had lost all expression. Of all the people in the room, only Neville had ever seen him look like this – not even Ron or Hermione. Neville remembered those last few frantic moments that they faced the Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries. He had seen that look flash across his face as he chased after Bellatrix. Had Susan still been in the room, she might have recognized the look from when he killed Rudolphus. Spinning around he could feel the crackle of his magic surging through his body. The air began swirling around him. The only thing that shook him out of his anger was seeing the horrified expression on Molly Weasley's face. The expression on Ginny's face bore a strange resemblance to Draco Malfoy's whenever he had launched a particularly good insult. It changed to mirror her mother's look as Harry magic pulsed in the room.

Harry's inner voice calmed him. He would not throw one of his magical tantrums here! He would be no better than Ginny if he did. Forcing himself to calm down, he turned away from the pair. Neville nodded to him.

"I am going upstairs. Keep her away from me, until she has calmed down."

Hannah grabbed his arm. He looked at the blond haired witch. "Go find Susan while you are up there. She probably needs someone to talk to."

“Why don’t you ...” He started.

“Go.” She commanded pushing him up the stairs.

He found her up in the attic, formerly occupied by Buckbeak. She was sitting on a bench leaning her head against the wall and crying softly. Harry was more than a little shocked by the venom in Ginny’s words towards Susan. The journey from the kitchen up to the attic had him seeing the youngest Weasley in a whole new and not entirely flattering light.

He hesitated at the doorway, uncertain of his next move. Death Eaters he could deal with, crying teenagers were not his forte. For a moment, he entertained the idea of sneaking back downstairs before Susan noticed him, but somehow he knew that Hannah and Chelsea would be waiting with glares of disapproval. Sighing, he walked into the room.

“Hey Susan. Were you hoping that by coming to the room in the house that smells like hippogriff and vermin that nobody would follow?” He said as he sat down next to her. Susan buried her head into her hands to muffle her sobs. Her trembling increased as she struggled to control herself. Harry cursed himself for his lack of talent in this area. Sirius would have known what to do. Deciding his safest approach he started patting her on her back. After about a dozen pats, Susan spun around and buried her head into his chest. He stopped patting and simply tried squeezing her around her waist in what could be best described as an awkward hug. Harry had a very sarcastic thought while holding her that Susan’s tears were a mere trickle in comparison to Cho’s waterworks.

“I am sorry Susan. You shouldn’t have to go through that. I am sure Ginny didn’t really mean what she said.” Harry felt her tense noticeably when he mentioned Ginny.

“She’s a wretched little bitch!” came her reply muffled by his chest.

“No. She just isn’t handling Percy’s death very well. She shouldn’t have said what she did and I am sure when she calms down, she will regret it.” Harry added an unspoken ‘I hope.’

Harry's presence was calming Susan down. Her trembling was subsiding and the sobs were coming under control. Unconsciously, Harry had started playing with Susan's hair with his hand that had previously been around her waist. It seemed to have a soothing quality. Again, he wondered why Hannah had looked to him instead of coming up to comfort her best friend. He felt Susan's hands, which had previously held his sweatshirt in a clenched grip relax and encircle him.

"How could she be so mean?" Susan asked.

"She's the youngest of a large family and the only girl. I would guess that everyone has always went out of their way for her." Harry offered.

"She hates me!"

"No, I am sure she doesn't. She is just ... ."

"Yes she does!" Susan said forcefully.

Harry was confused, but given his expertise that was to be expected. "Why do you think that?"

"Every time I come in the room she shoots me an evil glare and starts hanging all over you."

"I am afraid you have lost me. Asking me to understand a girl is a bit like asking Hagrid to do long division." He chuckled hoping to lighten the situation.

"She wants to be your girlfriend."

"Huh? No. Really? What about Dean?"

"You really are daft. When a girl spends the entire day wearing your sweatshirt, she likes you."

"She said she was cold!"

"It is summer break, Harry. I know this isn't the tropics but come on!"

"But Hermione said she didn't like me anymore."

“She is good with books. When it comes to people, she can’t even figure out Ron!”

Harry spent the next minute or so absorbing this. Ginny still had a thing for him! Up until last year, he couldn’t carry a decent conversation with her. He made a quick list of all of Ginny’s positive attributes. She’s pretty. She’s funny. She came with me to try and rescue Sirius. She’s good in a fight. We are pretty good friends. However, something troubled him.

“Okay. Say I believe you. What about Dean?”

“Making you jealous. Not really working though, seeing as you didn’t know what was going on.”

This led Harry to start a quick mental list of the things he didn’t like about Ginny. She’s playing immature games with Dean just to make me jealous. She is good in a fight, but he is going to have to fight a war! Her brothers are too protective of her. Suddenly, Ron’s comment on the Hogwart’s Express at the end of the term made sense. Ron wanted him to date Ginny! From all the time Hermione spent with her defacto sister, Mione must want him to date Ginny as well. He thought about the fifth year’s behavior over the last few days. She always sat next to him, seemed to touch him a lot. He concluded that Susan was correct. During his thinking, Susan had repositioned herself and now had her head resting on his shoulder facing away from him.

“Alright, so I get it. She has advanced from idol worship to teen witch weekly schemes. Lavender and Pavarti would be so proud. That explains why she is all over me, but what I don’t get is why she was positively vile towards you down there. I don’t recall her being mean to Hannah or Lisa. Why did she lash out at you?”

Harry felt Susan tense up again. The answer hit him instantly after he asked the question. Susan liked him and Ginny knew it. Whenever Susan was in the room, Ginny amped up her ‘act’. If he and Susan were having a conversation, Ginny came over and started talking. A vision of Hagrid at a blackboard solving an algebra equation briefly flitted across his mind’s eye.



Susan mumbled that she didn't know why Ginny was being so mean trying to avoid answering the question. Harry considered what to do about Susan. He quickly made a list of positives about the Hufflepuff in his arms. The positive side quickly included more items than Ginny's list. After spending the last week with her, he knew that had he asked she would have gone to the Department of Mysteries with him. She has been nothing but loyal and supportive since she arrived. Quite honestly, she was bearing up under the emotional strain of losing her mother and aunt too well. Harry being the master of repressing his feelings around people who care that he is, realized that she was hiding behind a façade just like he would.

Moving on he started a negative list for Susan and after a solid minute of searching his mind, the worst he could come up with was that she once dated Ernie Macmillan. Not exactly a major character flaw and she had already called it a gross error in judgment. Armed with this knowledge, Harry was uncertain of how to proceed. They had been holding each other for the better part of fifteen minutes. The only things that made him uncomfortable were the wood bench they were seated on and it seemed awkward that she faced away from him. He knew now that she was embarrassed to look at him right now. Marshalling his Gryffindor courage, he decided to do something about this right now.

"I understand. Ginny doesn't like you, because you like me." Susan let out a small gasp in reply. "I suppose both Ron and Hermione have given Ginny their seal of approval, so from their perspective it must be a done deal. It's too bad no one bothered to ask me what I want."

"What do you want Harry?" She whispered barely audible, feeling like her heart had climbed up into her throat.

"Someone that cares for me. I need someone that is strong enough to handle being with me. I don't need a girl who wants to play mother. I don't need silly teenage games. I need a girl that will stand by me the next time everyone starts to point their fingers at me and start to whisper behind my back. I need someone who respects me."

"I'm not strong." She muttered.

“I also need someone who is modest. You are stronger than you think.” Saying that he forced her to look at him. He saw her puffy eyes and tear streaked face. Knowing there was nothing else he could say, he did the only thing he could think of – he kissed her.

It was nice, very nice. Susan was momentarily stunned, but she came to her senses quick enough. They spent the next five minutes kissing each other. By then he had moved from her lips down to her neck causing her to moan. Harry was rather enjoying himself as virtually any boy his age would. He tasted the salt of her tears. He could feel her trembling again, but she obviously seemed to be pleased with the turn of events.

Susan was trying very hard not to think anymore. Harry was kissing her! She had heard those nasty rumors Cho had started that he wasn't a very good kisser. Maybe he just didn't have the proper motivation, because he was performing admirably! Was that his tongue? She caught herself growling in pleasure. A piece of innuendo came to mind, seekers really do have the best hands!

Finally, he broke away from her. “Susan as much as I would like to continue this, we both have a very long day ahead of us. I need to get a shower and clean myself up.” He said releasing her and standing up. She stood and took him into her soft embrace again. It had new meaning now, as they nuzzled each other. After another moment, he broke away again.

“So I guess I was right about you liking me?” He said with his best cheeky grin.

“What makes you say that?” She replied with a wink trying to tease him.

Harry leaned in next to her ear and breathed causing the hairs on her neck to stand up. “Because for the first time in a few days, your smile is back.” Harry turned away from the blushing Hufflepuff and went out the room.

Fifteen minutes later he was finished with his shower and dressing. There was a knock on the door.

"Come in." Hermione entered dragging a very pale looking Ginny Weasley.

"Harry, Ginny has calmed down. She wants to apologize."

"You seem to be doing most of the talking Mione." Harry said harshly.

Ginny burst into tears sobbing. "I am so sorry Harry. I shouldn't have blamed you. Please don't hate me! I needed to blame someone and I don't know what came over me."

"Are you planning on apologizing to Susan?"

"Um yes I suppose I should." Ginny looked as if that was the last thing she wanted to do outside of a return trip to the chamber of secrets.

"That would be a good start. Since, I am the proverbial king of lashing out at people when I am angry, I can't exactly stay mad with you. So why don't you let me finish dressing." Inside, Harry still wasn't pleased with Ginny's actions and accusations, but there were much more important things today. Both he and Susan had to listen to the wills of the deceased before the day is out. Now that he understood Ginny's motivations, it seemed a trifle immature. Not to mention that he and Susan had been tongue wrestling less than about thirty minutes ago.

Hermione beamed with a glowing smile as she had completed her task and proceeded to drag Ginny back out of the room. Ginny shot him another sorrowful look as she closed the door behind her. He finished dressing and slipped over to the room Susan and the Abbotts shared. Knocking on the door, he waited for a moment before Susan opened the door letting him in. Her smile was still there, but it was missing a bit of its luster. Her eyes looked like she had been crying again.

"Hi." He said.

"Hi yourself. Miss me already?"

“Uh huh! Ginny was just by to apologize. She is going to apologize to you later.”

“Oh. I bet it will be so genuine.” She replied making a face. She looked away for a moment and started to shake. “I miss my mother.”

On instinct alone Harry reached out and pulled her to him. He held her tight. After a minute he asked her what was wrong and if there was anything he could do to help.

“I’m sorry. I should be stronger. I came down here and the first thing I thought was that I can’t wait to tell mum that I kissed you. I catch myself forgetting that they are gone. I’m such a fraud! Everyone is telling me how strong I am, but I’m not!”

“You are Susan. You will be okay. Its grieving and everyone keeps telling me I need to be doing it more.”

“I just want to feel normal again! I can’t seem to control myself. One minute I am happy. The next, I am crying my eyes out! Harry tell me it goes away!” She had a pleading tone to her voice.

“It doesn’t ever fully go away, at least not for me. I still think about Sirius and Cedric all the time. Everyone tells me I cry like a bitch in my sleep.” Susan couldn’t help but laugh remembering the night she was in the same room. She caught herself immediately and looked at him with guilt on her face.

“Its okay. It is true! Hermione tells me that it is my subconscious trying to help me cope. You can only imagine how uncomfortable that conversation was. She even offered to get some books on how muggles cope with grief. Like she didn’t already have those books.”

He was doing it again, cheering her up. Susan fought her emotional reversal. She didn’t want to be happy right now. When he babbled something about “survivor’s guilt” she looked at him confused.

“Everyone knows I don’t sleep well at night. I actually read Hermione’s muggle book.”

Susan sighed, "Thank you Harry. I keep falling apart and you keep putting me back together."

"I suppose that is a boyfriend's duty. I think that's what I am right? Urk!" He grunted as she hugged him tightly.

"Yes!"

"Well then that is settled. Do you mind if we wait until after all this crap is over today before we shout it from the rooftops?" He asked hoping she wouldn't be offended.

She looked uncertain, so he continued cutting her off. "Its not like I am embarrassed or anything. I just don't want to create any more drama before we go to Gringotts."

"Oh, okay. I guess I understand. Just make sure I am somewhere where I can see her face when she finds out."

"My you have a bit of a nasty streak don't you? Well, I am going to head down. Don't want everybody to come looking for me."

Harry made his way down the stairs, thanking Merlin that in this crowded house he had managed to avoid running into someone while with Susan. He met everyone who was going in the parlor. The rest had moved on to the library. When Susan arrived about five minutes later, they prepared to leave via portkey to George and Fred's shop, which was only a short walk from the bank.

The group arriving at Gringotts consisted of the Weasley's, the Abbott's, Harry and Hermione. The adult Weasleys, Tonks, Lupin and Dumbledore providing the escort. Ginny continued to walk uncomfortably close to Harry. He managed to send a few 'Help Me' looks to Susan. She merely smiled at him and continued to converse with Hannah and Chelsea. Harry figured it was her way of getting back at him for wanting to not announce themselves as a couple just yet. Sensing no help was forthcoming, Harry closed the gap between himself and Tonks and tried to strike up a conversation.

"How are you handling all this?"

“Not so good. You?”

“About the same. I still blame myself for getting tricked into going there.” He said looking down.

“Well if we are playing the blame game, then I have to blame myself for not doing a better job at dueling auntie Bella. Sirius jumped in to fight her because she took me out. Crazy hag had been rotting away for a dozen years. I have been training day in and day out for the last six years. She shakes of the rust and kicks my bloody arse!” Tonks looked at him with a bit of anger across her normally humorous face. “So are we done playing the blame game now?”

“Yeah. Sorry didn’t mean to make you cross.” Harry hadn’t really been prepared for a scolding at that point. He slowed his pace to separate himself from her. Ginny immediately pounced on him offering comfort and whispering condolences where it was not wanted. She was clearly overcompensating for her grief driven tantrum. Harry watched as Remus moved over from his flanking position to exchange a few words and a scowl with the metamorphagus. Harry slowed further trying to make sure he could not overhear their conversation. He had heard the rumors of Remus and Tonks becoming closer and hoped that his actions did not cause an argument between the two. It was another reminder that today’s proceedings were not all about him.

A very old looking goblin dressed in dark suit, with three heavily armed goblin escorts met the party in the lobby. He introduced himself as Cleftskull, the department head for Wills and Inheritance. Gesturing to a passageway away from the main counter and the vaults, he led them to the main conference room. The room had a pair of private offices adjoining them. Two women sat in the comfortable high back chairs chatting amicably. Harry instantly recognized the platinum blonde hair of Narcissa Malfoy. He surmised that the raven-haired woman must be Tonks’s mother, Andromeda. They finished their conversation and Mrs. Tonks greeted her daughter with a look of concern on her face. Harry again felt a stab of guilt for angering her. ‘I wonder if this is how people usually feel around me, when I am in a state.’ He thought to himself.

Harry watched as Dumbledore and Lady Malfoy exchanged forced pleasantries. In between the polite words, he could sense two predators stalking each other. Narcissa was rumored to be a savage political opponent, gifted with beauty, guile and a cutting wit. It was no doubt she had her orders to stall and challenge every bit of Sirius's will. After a moment she politely separated herself from the headmaster and walked towards Harry with a purpose.

"I would wish you a good day, but I do not believe either of us really wish to be here today."

"Thank you." He said slowly not knowing what to make of this, wondering if it was a tactic to unnerve him. "I am sorry for your loss as well. Sirius was a great man."

"If greatness is measured in foolish actions, then my cousin was the greatest of them all."

"What do you mean?" Harry stammered at the nerve of the woman in front of him.

"I merely wanted to say that he was a foolish and brave individual. He proudly turned away from his family for the sake of his beliefs. He brashly made his choice and had both the willpower and determination to follow through. Someday under better circumstances, I would share with you a pensieve memory of his confrontation with his mother. I was fortunate enough to be present. It remains my fondest memory of him."

No one had been close enough to hear the words exchanged between Harry and Mrs. Malfoy, but they realized that whatever she had just said had clearly shocked and amused Harry at the same time. Most of his close friends recognized his genuine smile on his face rather than his polite 'I am forced to speak with you, but I would rather be somewhere else' smile that he usually shielded himself with.

"You are quite different from what I imagined Mrs. Malfoy."

"Please, my name is Narcissa. You are also quite different from my son's depiction."

“Where is Draco today? I would have thought he would be here, if for no other reason to taunt me.”

“Ah yes. Pity I sent him away on vacation. I am sure he would love to be here, but I do believe that having him here would be a most uncomfortable distraction for all of us who have to sit at the adult table. Had he known, I dare say he would have been in front of the mirror all night practicing his insults – yet again.” She said dryly with more than a hint of disdain in her voice.

Harry could not help but laugh at her comments. Obviously, Draco took almost completely after Lucius. His mother was nothing like him! He chided himself for lowering his guard in the presence of a potential enemy, but Merlin that was funny!

“Thank you Narcissa, for reminding me how to laugh. I am sure Sirius would want us to laugh for him.”

“How true. Cousin always said that ‘life is the ultimate game, make your own rules where you can. Cheat where you can’t!’ I look forward to today’s game, Harry.” The elegant beauty turned from him and walked back to her chair.

Lost in the exchange, he failed to notice Susan coming over to him. “It’s nice to see you smiling Harry. Care to share? I could use a pick me up right now.” Her sullen mood had returned.

“Later, but it is more than worth it.”

“The goblins are asking me to come to the private chambers to hear Mother and Aunt Amelia’s wills. I am allowed to invite whomever I please into the proceedings. Will you come with me?”

He vanished his smile and accepted, noting the scowl on both Ginny and Hermione’s faces. He followed Susan and the Abbott’s into the chamber. Sometime previously, Hannah and Chelsea’s parents must have arrived. He was introduced to Peter and Annabeth Abbott. Both of whom were rather shocked to see him there. Peter regarded him with a penetrating gaze as if to take Harry’s measure. Annabeth on the other hand looked at Susan, then Harry and back to Susan. She



then smiled and turned back to her daughters. Cleftskull noted his presence as well with a raised eyebrow.

“If you all will be seated we can begin.” The goblin said in a polite tone – well polite as a goblin could sound. Harry sat next to Susan and gripped her left hand in his. The last will and testaments of Dana and Amelia Bones were amazingly concise and straightforward. Peter Abbott was named Executor of both estates and given a list of charitable funds and endowments, which they wished to have funded. Amelia’s requested charities included several funds for families of fallen aurors. Both left heartfelt messages and all remaining funds to Susan, who bravely sat there not hiding the tears streaming down her face.

The most interesting item was that Dana emancipated Susan. True it was just under two months until her seventeenth birthday, but Susan was pleased anyway. Cleftskull brought out the Bones family tapestry and examined the fine print on the reverse side. Shaking his head, he turned to Susan.

“As you can see Lady Bones, you are now the sole surviving heir of the Bones family line. Most families include clauses to prevent the end of the family. These so called ‘End of the Line Clauses’ are enchanted into the family master ring, which passes the enchantment to your ring that I now present to you.”

Harry looked at the rest of the people in the room. All of them were purebloods and had paled slightly. He remembered that Dumbledore was concerned about Sirius’s will and possible End of Line clauses.

Cleftskull showed Susan the signet ring. “By accepting this ring you become Lady Susan Marie Bones – Matriarch of the Bones family, which by extension includes the Preston and Caldwell lines. The family possesses three hereditary votes in your government. Your head of family ring may only be removed by you and will act as a key to all your family vaults. Furthermore, you will be required to enter into a binding marital contract of your choice within 30 days after your next birthday. Said contract will be executed no later than one year from the date of signing.”

Harry saw everyone relax noticeably. He was confused and a little upset that his newly found girlfriend would be forced into a marriage in just over a year. Instead of being angry Susan looked relieved as she slid the family ring onto her right hand and watched the faint aura of magic flash. The goblin motioned for her to sign several documents, prick her finger to drip blood into a glob of warm wax and press the family ring to seal it. With that Cleftskull collected the items on the table, curtly nodded to those present and proceeded to leave the room.

“Why aren’t you upset Susan?” He asked.

She looked at him confused for a moment. “I keep forgetting that you don’t know that much about wizarding culture. I am sorry. Hannah and I have been worried sick about the End of the Line clauses. Some families have dozens of clauses forcing you to do horrible things or prearranged marital contracts that must be executed. Trust me it could have been much worse.”

“But you have to get married!”

“To whomever I choose! Trust me I was worried that I would find Crabbe or Goyle’s names in here. I at least get to have a say.”

“Is there any way to know what these clauses are?”

“Only if you get the current head of the family to tell you. They are the only ones who can modify them. Why do you ... .” She stopped realizing that Harry was the last Potter - a line that extended back to the days of Merlin himself.

“I wonder when Dumbledore was going to spring this little gem on me?” He muttered. “I am guessing just before my birthday next year.” The Abbots, who did not know the history between Harry and his headmaster looked a bit flabbergasted by his statement.

They were spared from further speculation by the return of Cleftskull. “Mr. Potter, we are ready to begin the reading of Sirius Orion Black’s will in the adjacent chambers. You are the primary beneficiary and therefore I must request your presence.”

“Go on Harry. Dumbledore asked us to wait with the girls until you can all leave back to your safe house together.” Peter Abbott said.

“He did, did he? Excuse me Cleftskull, I am allowed to have guests present, is that correct?”

“Indeed it is.”

“Then if you wish you may all come with me.”

The Abbotts declined politely, but Susan accepted leaving the Abbott family a chance to catch up with one another. Harry knew that both of them had recently joined the Order of the Phoenix after the attack at Susan’s house and they visited their children after the last few meetings. Everyone had left the main conference chamber already. The goblin had already made it to the next room and was entering when Harry stopped Susan.

“For luck.” He said kissing her.

Susan smiled back at him, “Watch yourself I can do magic now, Mister. You might want to start being a bit nicer to me.”

“Of course, here let me get the door for you, milady or do you prefer your roya highness?”

“Smartass!”

“I prefer Harry.”

“Hairy-ass? You actually prefer Hairy-ass? Eeww! That is gross!”

He had to admit that he walked right in to that one. Harry hung his head in mock defeat as he opened the door for her. She entered and then he quickly followed. The room was much more lavishly furnished than the previous one. The goblins obviously considered the Black will to be the “main event”. Many confused looks greeted Susan’s entrance. Harry gestured to a pair of open seats next to Narcissa Malfoy. Trying to avoid smiling at the prospect of annoying Ginny, Hermione, Dumbledore and perhaps just about everyone else in the room save Cleftskull, he pulled Susan’s chair out for her and

proceeded to sit directly next to Narcissa. Narcissa looked over acknowledging him and seeing the ring on Susan's right hand, Lady Malfoy nodded and smiled at Susan.

Cleftskull snorted in slight irritation. "Now that all parties are here, we can begin. The deceased has made several unusual provisions for today's proceedings." Just about everyone even Narcissa paled a bit wondering what both a goblin and Sirius would consider 'unusual provisions'.

Cleftskull tapped the desk and three other goblins entered. The first moved a stand into a position while the other two set a portrait on it. The painting had a table with several chairs around it. There were several doors running along the back wall. There was a brief silence complete with several people looking around the room. Inside the painting one of the doors opened and up to the table contained in the portrait strode none other than the image of Sirius Black. Several people gasped in surprise. An equal number including both Harry and Remus broke into broad grins.

"Had this done just after Christmas. Thanks for all your help you mangy furball." Sirius said waving to Remus. "Thought you had gotten rid of me didn't you? Cissy! You actually came, you scheming wench! Nice to see you didn't bring your spawn or deadbeat husband. Andy! Good to see you again! How's Ted? I see 'ickle Nymphadora' is here too. Oh, don't make that face, at least you are still alive. Don't even think about hexing the picture either – I'm indestructible at least that's what they tell me. Painted with all the amenities, ever filling Firewhiskey flask, bathroom, kitchen, library, and entertainment room, even my own bedroom. I would imagine my portrait will be the place to be wherever I end up being hung. I always was 'well hung'! Get it? Sorry, bad joke. I'm babbling a bit. First time I have seen everyone in a long time. Anyway, I am sure there will be time for socializing later. I suppose we should get down to business. My esteemed goblin associate has the actual copy, but I just so happen to have my own copy right here and I am empowered to make changes as I see fit up until the moment Harry signs the will. Any changes I make are updated on Cleftskull's copy immediately. I actually got the idea from Ms. Granger there. She mentioned that muggles often create something called a 'living will', I didn't quite understand it, but it

sounded like a fantastic idea. Before we get to the will, there is some preliminary paperwork that must be taken care of. This I do not have a copy of. My guess is that the real me wanted to make sure no one could talk me out of this. Cleftskull, if you please, items one and two.”

Cleftskull’s voice took over as Sirius took a long drink from his goblet. “These are separate legal proceedings apart from the will and can only be challenged on their own merits. Item one, the Emancipation of Harry James Potter by the signature of his legal godfather effective immediately upon Mr. Potter’s signature.”

Both Remus Lupin and Dumbledore objected immediately. Harry glared at them.

“Very well. State your objection and the legal basis for your objection.” The goblin asked.

Dumbledore began, “Since the unfortunate passing of Mr. Black. I have been serving as Mr. Potter’s guardian in the magical world. I do not wish him emancipated at this time.”

“Do you have a signed copy of the change of guardianship from the ministry?”

“Alas, no. The lack of a sitting minister and the current upheaval has delayed the paperwork’s signing. Perhaps a compromise can be reached.”

“Our laws are quite clear in this matter. Mr. Black’s death was several weeks ago. Any paperwork challenging a legal action must be presented at this time in its entirety. Do you have the paperwork?”

“No. I do not.” Dumbledore said with a hint of resignation.

“Then I must reject your challenge. Mr. Lupin what is your objection and does it also lack any legal basis?” Cleftskull had enjoyed humbling one of the most powerful wizards in recent history – perhaps a bit too much.

Lupin quickly looked at Dumbledore for guidance. Dumbledore shook his head signifying that there was no possible objection. A tense

moment passed before the werewolf shook his head and sat back down. "I withdraw my previous objection."

"Very well then. Mr. Potter by your blood quill signature you will be emancipated."

"Harry, I ask that you do not sign this form at this time." Dumbledore looked at him.

Harry up until this point was watching the proceedings with an intense look on his face. He felt Susan squeezing his hand reassuringly under the table. When he spoke his voice dripped with sarcasm. "It's about time you two noticed me. How considerate that you object to me becoming an adult. Such wonderful counsel and guidance from two of my parent's most trusted friends, wonder why you wouldn't want me to sign this. Could it be the blood wards at my aunt and uncles? Could it be the Potter End of the Line clauses? Thankfully, Susan clued me in on such things. There is so much I don't know about the Wizarding world. Why is that, Mr. Dumbledore?"

"Harry, the protections afforded you and your relatives will quickly fail. What benefits could you expect to reap from this action?"

"How about being able to use magic freely? Legally apparating? Making my own decisions? Do any of those matter?"

"You will be able to use magic freely when you return to Hogwarts in a month and a half. I have previously promised to help you learn to apparate. Correct me if I am wrong, but you seem to already be making your own decisions recently. I would ask that you not sign the document now, but wait until the end of this coming school year. You will have my full support then."

"When you put it that way sir, it makes me wonder if I have ever had your full support. We have previously discussed how safe I have actually been at your institution. Remus, what do you know about the End of the Line clauses?"

"After James's parents died and he assumed the head of family duties, he was required to marry within twelve months and produce an heir within thirty-six months. He mentioned that he intended to

change them, before his death, but I do not know whether he ever did.”

Harry paused for a moment and suddenly a very important question needed to be answered. “Remus, did my parents really love each other, or was it a marriage of convenience? Please tell me the truth.”

“That is a question that only James and Lily could answer. Before they dated there was a rivalry between the two of them. He was a popular pureblood heir and she was amazingly brilliant and clever muggleborn who had a talent for endearing herself to everyone she met. They were good together and I envied their relationship. They never gave me the impression that they were not in love.”

“You sound as if you had your doubts.”

“My condition gives me certain advantages, when it comes to reading other people. It was something of a whirlwind romance. Sometimes it had an air of ‘falseness’. You asked for my honest opinion. I only hope this answers your question.”

“I know you are not really Sirius, but what did you think of Mom and Dad’s relationship?” Harry turned back to the portrait.

“Prongs had it bad for Lily. I know she admired James, but I told James I was concerned before the engagement. James changed a lot after he lost his parents. By our seventh year, the war was picking up and you could feel it all through the castle. He still pranked with us, but you could tell that either his heart or his mind just wasn’t in it.”

Narcissa leaned in to Harry and whispered, “Though I was a year behind them, I might have some insight. Lily spent a great deal of time with our potion’s master Horace Slughorn. There were rumors of love potions. That said you will find that there are rumors of love potions in virtually every sixth or seventh year class.”

“You think she was slipping him a love potion?” Harry said aloud. Remus and Sirius immediately shouted different variations of no. Sirius even went so far as to add a few colorful adjectives to his objection before telling his cousin where she could stick her theories.

Lady Malfoy responded coolly, "No. I did not say that. James was smitten with her back in his fourth year. Most anyone could have seen that. My theory is that she was giving herself the potion. Again, I have no proof other than a few bits of overheard conversations and a distinct shortage of ashwinder eggs when I helped the professor inventory his stocks. I suspect only Horace and perhaps Albus could truly prove or disprove that theory."

You could have heard a pin drop in the room.

"Well sir?"

"Lily was very interested in becoming a potion's master. From what Horace reported, her skills rivaled those of Severus. I can say that early in her sixth year, Horace received my permission to give her individual lessons. He did also later request the same for Severus. I was not privy to the nature of these sessions or what particular potions they may have made during this time."

"Somehow your answer does not reassure me sir." Harry said with a touch of anger.

"Perhaps I could arrange for a meeting with Horace before the term starts. He has been somewhat of a recluse in recent years, but I believe I could track him down for you. I recommend we return back to the reason we are here today and not waste more time on James and Lily's motivations."

"That is a wonderful idea, sir!" Harry said with mock enthusiasm. "I am curious what benefits you hope to gain by not having me sign this document. Would you care to explain?"

"Harry, your blood protections are important."

"No they aren't!"

"Why do you believe that?"

"Simple, you just said that you would support me signing it at the end of the next school year. I am not going back there before this year starts, so what is the point in waiting. It certainly can't be the wards



and as you pointed out, it is only about seven weeks until the term starts. That leaves only my emancipation and these 'End of the Line' clauses as possible reasons." Harry hoped that Hermione would be impressed by his use of Dumbledore's logic against him, but knew her adoration of the wizard would color her opinion.

Channeling his Gryffindor courage, he foraged ahead. "So, who is she?"

"I am sorry Harry, I am not sure who you speak of?"

"She! The one you want me to marry. You've known about this all this time. I am sure you have someone in mind? So, who is it?" Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a beaming smile from Narcissa. He wasn't sure if it was because of his cool use of logic or that she was simply 'enjoying the game' as she had mentioned earlier. Susan looked on angrily.

"We were hoping that you would establish a meaningful relationship during the year and perhaps this would be a starting point. Last year you showed interest in Ms. Chang, but the prospect of a long term relationship dimmed quickly."

"Who is 'we'?"

"Myself, Remus, Sirius, Minerva and Molly."

Harry looked away from the headmaster to the named group. All save his head of house were present. Remus only met his gaze for a moment before looking away. The portrait of Sirius shrugged and smiled at him. Molly had a calm look on her face. It was a mother's look of 'I know what best for you child'. To Harry, it was like watching pieces of a puzzle fit together. With his emerald eyes boring a hole through her, he pressed on.

"So this would explain the new assertive version of Ginny, I have seen lately. I suppose that would be your doing?" He moved his eyes from the mother to the daughter, who had a guilty look on her face. From there he looked at Hermione, who also shifted uncomfortably.

"You knew too! Didn't you?"

She wouldn't meet his eyes and gulped noticeably. "I was asked about my intentions towards you at the beginning of last year. I am sorry I didn't tell you."

"All these times you badgered me about 'holding things back' and you were sitting on this! Please go on satisfy my curiosity, what did you tell them? It seems like you were given first go at me."

"Initially I told them that I wasn't sure and by Christmas I had made up my mind that we wouldn't be more than just friends."

"Because you fancy Ron?"

The shocked looks on both Ron and Hermione's faces would have been priceless, if Harry wasn't so angry at the moment. A few weeks from this moment, a young Gryffindor named Natalie McDonald would receive an owl proclaiming her the winner of the Ron/Hermione dating pool as a result of Harry's question. The galleons would come as a delightful surprise to the young girl allowing her to upgrade to a much more competitive broom for the coming school year.

"Oh come off it already! You fancy Ron. He fancies you. I am sorry if my trivial problems caused me to out the secret that only you two seem not to know about. So excuse me for embarrassing you."

"So did you approach any others in the Harry Potter bridal pool? Or is Ginny the winner by default?" Ginny managed an indignant look. Secretly, he wondered if she was upset that Hermione had been given a chance.

Sirius answered from the portrait. "I am sorry this is upsetting you Harry, but don't snap at Ginny and Hermione. If it will satisfy your answer, several others were discussed including Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnett, Angelina Johnson, Tonks, Emmeline Vance and some of the others from either the house quidditch teams or your defense club."

"Oh thank goodness I still have a chance with Marietta Edgecombe!"

"Enough with the sarcasm already Harry!" Sirius said.

“Harry do you wonder why people don’t approach you about this? You have only just started being interested in girls. Picture them trying to tell you that you have to get married. Please don’t rush to judge everyone. We really do care about you.” Hermione added.

“Fine! Okay Ms. Granger, what does ‘Hogwart’s a History’ say about married couples at the school? I know you would have looked it up the moment they left you alone.”

“There are several rooms near the professor’s quarters that have in the past been used in such instances. They are typically used to house visitors, but were used on many occasions during the previous wars. The last couple was in 1953, when the sole remaining heir to the Jacobs family was there from his six and seventh years. His bride was not a student, but lived in the castle as a guest. The last student couple was in 1946.”

“Thank you. So why does everyone want me to wait until next year?”

“They don’t want to take the chance that I will become pregnant while in school.” Ginny answered.

“Oh okay. Bill, I have seen you examining the wards. If I sign this, how long do those wards last?”

“They will start fading and be pretty much useless in 72 hours.”

“So the Dursleys would have time to get out of there.”

“Yes.”

“Cleftskull, you have been quiet. May I ask you advice?”

The goblin looked at Harry momentarily stunned but then impressed. “Interesting. A room full of humans and you turn to me. Why is that?”

“You have no personal interest – only the perspective of what is ‘good business’. Tell me from an independent point of view what is ‘good business’ here?”

Cleftskull smiled baring his yellow teeth. "I see and am honored. You seem to be controlling your anger quite well, which suggest you are mature. I had half expected curses and jinxes to be exchanged by now. Your questions and arguments are well thought out suggesting that you are intelligent. Your history tells me that you are already a warrior and that there is little the others can do to prevent the battle from coming to you yet again. Your choice is simple. You may allow others to continue to dictate your life, if you believe there is some benefit to that, or you will stand as a warrior to fight the coming darkness."

"Thank you for your perspective. Your counsel is greatly appreciated." Harry grasped the blood quill and scrawled his name on the parchment and stood to hand the document back to Cleftskull. "I will stand and fight on my terms."

The ancient goblin accepted the parchment and smiled again. "Very good, Lord Potter. We will finish with the Black will and proceed directly to the Potter will. I happen to have all the paperwork with me."

"You knew I would sign it didn't you?"

"The outcome was never in doubt for one who understands 'good business'."

Harry looked at the faces of the people surrounding him as he returned to his chair. Most of the Weasleys bore looks of concern, probably for Ginny. Hermione looked angry, no doubt believing that he was being rash and impetuous. Dumbledore and Lupin seemed resigned. Narcissa Malfoy smiled openly at him. He wondered if she was planning on using this memory for a Patronus. Susan met his eyes and smiled her half smile at him.

"We can now proceed with item two. The formal adoption of Harry James Potter by Sirius Orion Black. By this document Mr. Potter is to be considered the adopted son of Lord Black. This document was signed two years ago and witnessed by myself and the head of Gringotts. Do you willingly accept this Lord Potter?"

"I do." Realizing that this must have been one of the first things Sirius did when he escaped from Azkaban.

“Then sign the document. If there are any objections to this proceeding now would be the time to submit them.”

Everyone looked at Narcissa Malfoy. She carefully removed two stacks of paper from her briefcase. “Oh I suppose this is the part where I grow two heads and start speaking in parseltongue, pledging my eternal servitude to the Dark Lord? Tell me cousin, I do not mean to spoil your surprises, but is it safe to assume that Lord Potter will become Lord Black as well?”

Sirius nodded very slowly from his portrait. The assembled group waited barely breathing.

“How much are you planning to leave to me?”

“Ten thousand galleons, sorry Cissa, but I don’t want to fund your husband’s evil any more than I have to, but that amount is sufficient that it would make your objection difficult.”

“Make it five hundred thousand and I will forego any objections.” Harry had to admit she had a way of quieting a room.

“Harry, it will come out of your share?”

“Do it!”

“Done.”

Narcissa waved her wand over one stack and it vanished. The other stack sat there. “We will need this later, Lord Black. This is where the game gets more interesting. Please cousin, let us continue.”

“Okay, then without further adieu here it is - my will and testament. I, Sirius Orion Black being of sound mind, but apparently missing body do hereby declare this to be my last will and testament! First to everyone in this room with the last name Tonks, I leave one hundred thousand galleons. To everyone in this room who is a Weasley but not named Arthur or Molly, I leave twenty five thousand galleons each. If you aren’t of age yet, Arthur and Molly will control it as a trust fund until you are of age. Arthur and Molly, I know you don’t want it, but you deserve it. Take one hundred thousand for yourselves. If your

name is Hermione, you get twenty five thousand galleons. That should stock your private library quite nicely. Cissa, we covered you already. The Lestranges get absolutely nothing. If your name is Lupin or Dumbledore you get five hundred thousand each. Lupin also gets the hunting lodge in Hogsmeade and the shrieking shack. I also need you to sit for a wizarding portrait. I need my pranking buddy back. Finally if your name is Harry Potter, you get everything else, the whole nine yards. Cleftskull has the whole lists. The short of it is you have plenty of property here and in Europe and several million galleons. The entire Black fortune and as a bonus you get me, one high quality wizarding portrait capable of hours of intelligent or childish conversation – your choice. That is all there is folks. Sorry to hurry through this, but I am as curious as everyone else is about what my clever cousin is up to. Cleftskull, would you give Harry his ring.”

“By accepting this ring you become Lord Harry James Black-Potter. The Black family possesses three hereditary votes in your government. As there are other heirs, you are not subject to the Black End of the Line clauses. I will provide them to you for your review. The ring will access all your family vaults. If you will sign here, blood here and seal the blood with the ring.”

Harry watched the cut on his finger close itself and felt the tingle of magic envelop him. He knew he would feel this again when he performed the same ritual for the Potter line. In a sense it was liberating, but there was also a sense of trepidation.

“Well that’s done. Narcissa, I am certain you have something you wish to discuss?”

“Why yes I do Lord Black. As my head of family, I am requesting your intervention on my behalf. My husband seems to have met several of the clauses in our marriage contract that would render it void if you were file the necessary paperwork. I just so happen to have this paperwork right here.” Narcissa said all this in a rushed almost breathless tone as if the words were struggling to get out faster than she could say them. Her smile was absolutely predatory.

“Cleftskull, may I impose upon you to review this paperwork. There seems to be a lot here and it’s not a question of trust, but well I guess

it is a question of trust. I mean I could be sitting here with a blood quill signing away and you could slip a marriage contract to Pansy Parkinson in there. I never thought I would have to be 'constantly vigilant' here. While he reviews it, I am curious about the other stack."

"Oh those were all the objections my soon to be ex-husbands associates wished for me to submit. There's quite a nice bit of legal work to. Shame it all went poof! They didn't count on this being my one chance to be free of that tosser."

Five minutes passed before the goblin pronounced the paperwork to be exactly what Narcissa had proclaimed it to be. Harry smiled widely at Narcissa as he sat down blood quill in hand to attack the small mound of parchment. Both Narcissa and Cleftskull indicated what should be signed and where he should initial. The moment he signed the last line Narcissa hugged him and kissed his cheek. She turned to Cleftskull and told him that the funds from the will should be deposited to her personal vault; where as much of her ex-husband's fortune had already been moved without raising suspicion.

"Well it seems like I have done enough here. I really should be going. Andy, do you mind?" Narcissa asked pulling a potion vial from her pouch. Her sister cut a lock of hair from her head and dropped it into the vial. Narcissa downed it in one gulp and within seconds had transformed into a duplicate of her sister Andromeda.

"Nymphadora dear, if you want to take my form, you could probably lead a group of your esteemed coworkers to my old house and I could give you an idea of where you might want to look around. It is all right here on this parchment. Be careful in that second place though, I think there are some nasty curses for anyone not of Malfoy blood trying to get in there. Molly darling, I need a bodyguard for a few days until I get settled may I borrow this one. You're a strapping looking lad. What's your name?"

"Uh, Charlie, Mrs. Mal - oh sorry Ms. Black."

"What do you do when you are not fighting the forces of evil?"

"I am a dragon handler."

“Oh, an outdoorsman. You must stay in top shape. Yes, do come along. Best grab your new vault key. We can do some shopping while we tour the mainland. It has been a distinct pleasure meeting you all. Harry, I was proxy voting the two votes for the Lestrangle family. Albus can instruct you on how to claim those votes, as there is no one who can legally vote for them. You might have a challenge from the Travers family, but usually in those cases it defaults to the oldest family can claim the votes and quite frankly it doesn't get much older than the Potters. Hurry up Charles, say your goodbyes, I only have fifty eight minutes left in this body and I do want to get out of this country! Harry if you beat the bastard, I will be back to help you run the world that will no doubt prostrate itself before you.”

Harry and the rest of the room looked on as the whirlwind known as Narcissa Black directed Charlie to his kin for goodbyes and rushed over to the portrait giving Sirius a quick kiss. By the time Charlie had finished, Narcissa had already said farewell to Harry, her sister, her niece and Dumbledore. She caught Charlie's arm and began to whisk him towards the exit. To everyone's (well perhaps not Charlie's) amusement Narcissa's right hand firmly squeezed one of Charlie's butt cheeks as he opened the door for her.

The last words they heard as the door closed were “Why Charles, you do keep in shape.”

There was a minute of awkward silence, which ended with Cleftskull clearing his throat. “We shall continue. Our final order of business is the reading of James and Lily Potter's will.”



## Chapter 9 – Secrets of a Successful Death Eater

It was well past nine in the morning before Lord Voldemort made his first appearance of the day. There was a slight spring in his step that hadn't been there before. The minions he encountered on his way to the kitchen may have noted the strange expression on his face and that his cheeks had regained some of their color. It frightened them to think that something would actually make him cheerful. They dared say nothing for fear of their lives, their magic and their very souls.

He passed by the room where the ritual had been performed last evening. The door was slightly ajar. Concerned that something may be amiss, he opened the door the rest of the way. Inside, the lifeless body of Percy Weasley lay on the table. Peter was circling around him whispering incantations and fluidly moving his wand. He chanted for a solid thirty seconds before pausing to force a greenish liquid down the throat of the deceased. From the wand movements and the color of the potion being used Voldemort recognized this as the second of four stages in the creation of an inferi. He also knew that the caster had a ten-minute window to prepare for the next casting. He would have ample opportunity to ask Wormtail for an explanation.

"Peter, you continue to surprise me. I see you are doing some beginning Necromancy here. Branching out into some new skills? When I instructed you to dispose of the body as you see fit, I did not expect this."

"Good morning Milord. You might not recall, but before I was Ron Weasley's 'pet', young Percival here was my caregiver. He was very attentive and a decent enough person. I thought it fitting that I give him a proper send off."

"And what pray do tell do you plan on doing with your new toy?"

"I had thought of sneaking him back to the burrow for the next time one of those wretched blood traitors shows their cursed faces, but now I am leaning towards having one of your servants at the ministry sneak him back into the office. After all, he is just missing from work today now isn't he? A little glamour charm to cover his new look and an odor controller and who would notice? He could very well kill a

couple of people or at least maim a few. Besides, the mayhem and chaos would be entertaining.”

“Why Peter, that is truly inspired thinking. Definitely the ministry idea! I was just concerned you would keep him around here. His constant presence would have been rather unsettling to young Penelope. So do tell me, what has gotten into you lately? You seem so different. I have had half a mind to check you for poly juice if it wasn’t for that silver hand.”

“Master do you remember that raid in Brighton two months ago? One of the worthless muggles I disposed of had a large collection of books. His vocation was what muggles call a ‘motivational speaker’ and the collection of books I took from him has been most inspirational. They focus on the power of positive thinking, creating career goals and identifying the mindset that will allow you to succeed in your life.”

Lord Voldemort had seen many things since he first began walking this earth. It had been a long time since something made him chuckle. It was a foreign sound in his throat. As ridiculous as it sounded, one of his minions was quoting career advice in the middle of creating a walking soulless killing machine. Maybe it was the euphoria from last night’s ritual, but it was genuinely amusing listening to Peter at the moment. He was a bit on the famished side, but wanted to see where this bizarre conversation was heading.

“So tell me what have you learned about your career goals and what attributes have you identified as contributing to your success as a Death Eater?”

Peter had a slightly glazed over fanatical look in his face as he sorted through the potion vials looking for the third stage activation agent. “First I had to isolate the attributes of a successful Death Eater. One of the most important is the ability to generate fear. You will notice that I have begun dressing in darker clothing, my previous cloaks were more of a grayish color tinge to them. I wanted to do that whole billowing cloak thing that Snape does, but I haven’t been able to persuade him to teach me the secret. Neutral colors do not evoke much reaction as either very dark or very light colors. So I decided that a better wardrobe would help bolster my self-image and reinforce

my core values allowing me to perform at a higher level. From there I looked at what characteristics do your more successful servants possess. Bella is a fanatical killer. She is absolutely ruthless, willing to kill man, woman, child, or even a kitten at a moments notice. I am working hard to emulate that, but what seems to be giving me the most trouble is how she knows just when to finish off a victim. She seems to grasp instinctively on when torturing no longer seems to be generating any tangible returns. I guess it is more of an art form than something that can be taught. The next thing I noticed is that to really excel you need to have an air of sophistication. Lucius, Severus and of course yourself seem to have that ability to charm while killing. It seems to unsettle your opponents and has an executive quality to it, but one of the rules to changing your mindset is to acknowledge your own personal shortcomings. I know I will never be a brilliant conversationalist. It also seems to be a problem trying to integrate Bella's ferocity with witty banter. I am not sure it can be done. That explains a theory that I have been working on as to why she does that baby talk thing. So, knowing that you are a 'performance based employer', I figured that you are more interested in quantity versus quality. You will probably be more impressed by a large body count versus creative ways of killing at least initially. Plus I figured as I killed more, my performance would naturally evolve to include either witty banter, baby talk or whatever little idiosyncrasy I may develop."

Voldemort nodded thoughtfully as he listened to Peter continue to spew words from his mouth. Somewhere during the conversation, he was certain that Peter had started speaking in tongues, using phrases like 'performance based employer' or 'developing collaborative synergy', whatever in Slytherin's name that actually meant! He sighed as the realization set in that yet another of his inner circle had slipped past the thin line that separates sanity from insanity, but at least Peter seemed to believe every word from those muggle books. He certainly seems motivated lately. Voldemort made a mental note to try and observe Peter at the next battle, to see this new mania firsthand.

"Well it is good to see you are taking steps in a positive direction Peter. I will be expecting great things from you in the near future. I should leave you to your reanimation. Perhaps when there is time

later you could tell me more about your career 'roadmap', but for now I should leave you to your little project here on the table."

"Thank you Milord. If you would like to see the books sometime ..."

"No! That won't be necessary, but if you find something which may enhance our 'corporate strategic goals' please do bring it to my attention." He said walking out of the room wondering if St. Mungo's had ever commissioned a study on the long term effects of an animagus staying in his or her animal form for prolonged periods.

He walked into the kitchen to find his goddaughter looking a bit worse for the wear. A small pang in his chest that wasn't hunger, made him sigh. She was probably upset over the loss of her husband. The irony struck him that he actually felt more human! Who in their right mind would have ever imagined that performing such a dark ritual could make him feel more human! Her hair had a bit of an unkempt look about it and her eyes were swollen and puffy. She looked at a scone for a moment and her shoulders trembled.

"Percy used to always butter my scones for me." She said in a quavering voice. "It was one of the things I loved about him."

"I see you are upset." He said looking to grab a plate quickly not wanting to deal with a hormonal and upset pregnant woman especially one he had vowed never to harm, the temptation might prove too great.

Suddenly her entire posture changed, "Did it sound realistic? I was trying really hard to sound distraught. Was it over the top?" Her eyes glistened.

"No, it was quite believable. I don't think the Weasleys will suspect a thing. I am curious, how did you manage the puffiness around the eyes." He did not want to betray the fact that she had actually fooled him.

"Oh, I peeled an onion by hand up in my room this morning. It had just the look I was going for. I was going to use some eyeliner that I am allergic to, but that makes me breakout." She said looking very satisfied.

"It was an excellent job. Now do remember if Dumbledore is around and you feel this," He paused and extended a delicate feather light tendril of legilimancy, "You need to do what?"

"Think about how much I miss my husband and worry if he is ever going to come home to me and our child." She responded immediately bringing memories to the foreground of her mind. He saw multiple images of Percy.

"Very good. He is a sensitive fool and he won't probe any harder than that. You should be able to gain their trust quickly, because they would never suspect you."

"Will I see father before I go?"

"If all goes well we will be going to fetch him this evening. I imagine that we can make some time for a little family reunion."

"Oh, thank you!"

"Now, I do not want you to be alarmed, but I think you should know that Peter is turning our dearly departed Percy into an inferni. He is going to have him sent to the Ministry as a little surprise gift. I just don't want this to come as a shock to you." He said in a somewhat gentle tone.

"Not Percy! Why did it have to be Percy? Why, please Merlin tell me why?" She shuddered and trembled again before looking up and smiling evilly. "Just staying in character."

"Indeed, and well done."

----- (Scene Break because people keep requesting it.) -----

It took a minute for everyone to settle down from Narcissa's departure with Charlie. Mrs. Weasley was glaring at Dumbledore and openly worrying about her son's welfare in the company of "that woman". Fred and George looked thunderstruck with huge grins on their face from watching their elder brother practically manhandled by Narcissa Black. Bill looked relieved that he had not been chosen.

Cleftskull regained control of the proceedings. "We will now read the last will and testament of James and Lily Potter. All guardianships and trust allotments previously in effect are hereby terminated and must now be approved by Lord Potter."

Pausing momentarily he withdrew a yellowed envelope with the words 'To Harry James Potter' on it. He slid the envelope across the table to Harry. Harry refocused his breathing and concentrated on his occlumency. Thus far he was impressed by his emotional control. It was the culmination of a very difficult week of exhausting practice. He knew that he could ill afford any childish outbursts today. Otherwise, it would simply validate everyone's pet theory that he wasn't emotionally mature enough to be considered an adult.

"This is the will and testament of James Harold Potter and Lillian Evans Potter. To be executed on the day Harold James Potter reaches his majority in the Wizarding World. The deceased leave the following:

To Remus J. Lupin and Peter B. Pettigrew the sum of two hundred and fifty thousand galleons each. To Sirius Black, we leave only our love. You already have all the money you will ever need. To Frank and Alice Longbottom, we leave five hundred thousand galleons and our hopes and prayers. To Vernon and Petunia Dursley the sum of three million pounds."

Cleftskull listed off several other recipients including Dumbledore, but Harry's ears were not working anymore. The Dursleys! Three million pounds! What in Godric's name for? He stared at the yellowed envelope in front of him, wondering what message it contained for him. He returned his attention to the goblin speaking.

"All other properties and accounts are to be the property of Harry James Potter upon his acceptance of his position as Lord Harry James Potter. Mr. Potter accepting this ring will bring the Potter End of the Line clauses into effect. You will be required to wed within twelve months. You will be compelled to produce an heir within thirty-six months and two additional heirs within ten years. You are instructed to form or contribute to no less than two charitable organizations and fund them a minimum of one hundred thousand

galleons a piece or one percent of the current value of the Potter liquid assets, whichever being the lesser. The Potters were once the retainers of Godric Gryffindor and assisted in the construction of Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft. With this in mind, the head of the family is instructed to provide aid and assistance to the current headmaster of said institution. In turn, the head of the Potter line is entrusted with a seat on the Hogwarts Board of Governors. The Potter family has acquired five hereditary votes in your government. Use them wisely. Do you accept this ring and the responsibilities that it entails?"

"I do." Harry was curious what exactly 'compelled to produce an heir meant'. He would save that question for later.

They repeated the blood-wax-ring ceremony he had witnessed Susan perform and he had already participated in when he assumed the role of Lord Black. He inquired about what properties were owned by the Potters. Cleftskull scanned several documents before shaking his head.

"Lord Potter, your family has a considerable amount of land at its disposal, but all residences have been destroyed by either the forces of Grindlewald or Voldemort. At this time there are no properties ready for habitation. If you desire, I will have a reputable architectural firm conduct site surveys of the various holdings to determine the most desirable location for a structure."

"No, don't worry about that now. The Black family properties are fine for the moment. I have more important things to worry about."

"Very well then Lord Potter. I will take my leave. Feel free to contact my colleague Scarmaker. He is currently the Black account manager and ranks among our most efficient managers. The manager of the Potter account is currently unfilled. You may elect to appoint Scarmaker to this position, or fill it with another selection if you wish to keep the accounts separate."

"Thank you for your advice Cleftskull, both now and earlier. I will defer to your judgment. Please ask Scarmaker to manage both the Black and Potter accounts." The goblin looked thoughtfully at Harry and nodded before leaving. Harry sat back down and looked at the room

full of people claiming to be his friends. It pained him to think that the most supportive people today were Susan and Narcissa. He looked at Susan.

"A lot to take in huh?" She asked with a look of concern on his face.

"Yeah. Growing up I had nothing. Now it seems like I have everything, but it still feels like I have nothing."

"You've got me." She whispered and squeezed his arm under the table.

"Thanks for reminding me."

Harry opened the letter and looked at the worn parchment contained within. The script was blocky, obviously written by a man.

Dear Son,

I hope you never read this, or if you do I am right beside you having a good laugh at my foolishness. Somehow, I doubt it. I have just been informed of a prophecy that may possibly concern you and it scares me. I have never put much stock in prophecies in general; sometimes I feel that once you have heard one, the actions you take are colored by what you think you are supposed to do to fulfill the prophecy. As such, it becomes self-fulfilling. If you don't know what prophecy I am referring to talk to Albus Dumbledore or go to the Department of Mysteries and they will allow you to access it.

What does a father say to his son in such an instance? I am sure you would like to hear me say that I am confident in all the precautions and preparations your mother and I are taking. I'm not. Maybe I am just a stubborn twenty-one year old, but hiding under a fidelius charm just doesn't seem proper. My plan involved two dozen hit wizards under contract, the Marauders, Frank and Alice Longbottom, Alastor Moody and a heavily warded castle in the Scottish highlands. Needless to say, your mother and Dumbledore outvoted me. They are putting too much stock in obscure spells and forgotten rituals. I often wonder if it is us using the magic or the magic using us. I don't blame them though, that attitude seems to be everywhere in the magical world, but I am beginning to believe that magic does not in



fact have the solution to every problem. Your mother says that I am a cynic. I prefer the term realist.

In the event that both your mother and I fall, she has enacted an obscure blood magic ritual to protect you by placing you with her sister. There are no members of my family left that are related close enough. They seem like decent enough muggles, I suppose. I don't like the way this whole transaction took place though. It seemed a bit heavy handed on our part. I hope that Lily's actions did not reap unintended consequences. The Dursleys seemed quite reluctant. Out of my own guilt, I added the extra million to the previously agreed payment.

The day I became Lord Potter ranks among the saddest in my short life. I sat in an empty room and stared at the family tapestry. You would be shocked at the number of Potters that never reached the age of thirty. We are the vanguard of the light, but it looks as if we are losing. So many wars, so many battles have all but destroyed our noble family. The cost of freedom for Britain has been paid with Potter blood. Now there are just you, Lily and I - in all likelihood there will be just you by the time this letter is opened.

I will try and liven up the mood here. Rereading the letter has depressed me as much as I am sure it has you. I sound like I am already defeated. I am still breathing. I have a beautiful wife and a fantastic son! I'm not beaten yet! Remember that Harry. As long as you are breathing, as long as you can still get back on your feet, you aren't beat yet! Rest assured that if he comes for you, it will be licking his wounds from fighting me! I'm a better quidditch player than a dueler, but I am no slouch. I hope you have taken to the greatest sport in the air as well. My motto is Seekers may win the game, but Chasers play the game! I would have been pro, if this damn war wasn't around, but I can play what if games all day long.

No matter what be true to your instincts. Don't hesitate to 'go from the gut'. Peter and Remus are always telling me that 'thinking gets me into trouble'. Sirius doesn't think, so he isn't allowed to comment.

I will leave you with this parting advice; you have a destiny to fulfill. Do it son! Make sure that your children do not have to sit in a room

reading a letter from their 'old man' about how history has a tendency to kill off people named Potter.

I love you son,

James Potter

Harry finished the letter and felt the overwhelming strain against his occlumency shields. In his mind's eye, the cracks and fissures in his protective wall became gaping holes as his emotions surged outward. He opted to use a technique mentioned in his text called 'pain redirection' with his left hand he pounded the bottom of his fist into the table. The jolt of pain traveling up his arm helped to relieve the pressure on his shields. Susan jumped in surprise and joined the rest of the people in the room looking at him strangely. The only one who truly understood the purpose behind his action was Dumbledore. Their eyes met briefly. If looks alone were capable of hurling curses across the room a full-scale battle would be in progress. After a minute, Harry looked back down at the letter in his non-throbbing hand.

In a cold voice devoid of any emotion Harry said, "I need to go see the Dursleys. Will you escort me there? I need you to check the wards there to see how much time they have to get out of there."

"Why do you feel the need to go back there Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"I need to find out what you and my mom did to them! I don't trust you to tell me the truth and as much as they hate me, I expect they will give me a straight answer."

"I do not understand Harry."

"Apparently, whatever it was it made my father feel guilty enough to give them an extra one million pounds!" Several people in the room murmured.

"Harry, I would caution you against going back there ..."

Harry choked back a derisive chuckle. "There's a switch! Normally, you can't wait to send me back to that hellhole, but the moment I might actually want to ask them questions it's not safe anymore."

Harry didn't wait for him to answer. He stood and started towards the door. Susan was following him, but at the moment he didn't care. Bill looked at Harry and back to Dumbledore confused for a moment.

"Harry, are you sure?"

"Yes Bill. You are the best person I know when it comes to wards. I'm going with or with out you. I'd prefer with you, but I settle for the other."

Molly Weasley chimed in, "Harry, please stop and wait for a moment."

"No! I think I have listened to enough half truths and misinformation for one day. Are you going to release your lock on this door old man?"

"I believe we should all calm down Harry, before anyone leaves this room."

"I will make this simple for you Albus. You need me. I know you need me. You know you need me. I will never be your puppet again. Your manipulations of my life ended today. Those days are over! The will said aid and assistance, not blind servitude. You can either accept it or not. Your problem, not mine. Deal with it! So what's it going to be?"

Dumbledore waved his hands and the door opened. He nodded to Bill. "Bill, you and Remus accompany him."

"I only need Bill."

"And who exactly will be protecting Bill while he checks the wards?"

"Fine."

"You realize this is not over Harry."

“Not by a longshot! I suppose if I can work with the greasy bastard, that I can work with you. By with you I mean with you not for you.” Harry spun around ignoring the collective gasps.

Harry looked out into the conference room where a security detail of six armed goblins had entered at the other end. “I am guessing that Gringotts frowns on the use of magic inside the bank. Come on we will let our wise leader deal with them.”

The goblins eyed Harry and the three people following him as they crossed in the room. Harry looked at the lead goblin and gestured back into the private room. The goblin sneered at him before nodding and letting them pass.

“Susan, what are you doing?”

“He’s going to watch Bill. Who is going to watch you?”

“No one needs to watch me.”

“Well too bad. We’re both adults now, last time I checked. So to use your own argument, ‘deal with it’”.

“Good point. Bill, can you drop a glamour on us outside to make our clothes look like muggle clothes.”

“Sure.”

“Is the floo still connected at Mrs. Figg’s?”

Remus answered, “Yes it is.”

“Good. We will go from Fred and George’s shop.” Harry said leaving no doubt who was in charge.

----- (Scene Break) -----

Lord Voldemort stood at the edge of a rocky cliff, watching the waves crash against the rocks below. It had a timeless quality to it, the brutal relentless power of nature. He paused to drink in the majestic scene before him and consider his place in the universe. Was he the tidal

force cresting against the ignorance of mankind? Or could he be the shoreline, defying the forces that worked against him? His Death Eaters shuffled nervously behind him in obvious discomfort. The ten muggles they had captured were herded into a small circle, with their eyes glazed over from the imperious curse. The sole squib lay stunned after Voldemort grew tired of his screams. They would wake him when the dementors arrived.

He thumped his unicorn hide vest in anticipation. Unbidden from the back of his mind the words of Albus Dumbledore could be heard. He had still been possessing Quirrel at the time and the pathetic fools were bemoaning the deaths of the unicorns in the forbidden forest. Dumbledore's words went something like "knowingly killing such a noble creature is an unforgivable act that stains the killer's soul."

He muttered under his breath, "Well Albus if that is indeed the case, what does killing them, drinking their blood, grinding their horn into powder and skinning them for their enchanted hide get you?" The vest was comfortable, flexible and more spell resistant than dragon hide. The powdered horn coated his yew wand and amplified his spells strength and the blood kept him from falling back into the abyss for so many years. In his eyes the creature was truly a source of beauty, life and security. It was also a colossal waste of magical potential. The world idolized such creatures, but refused to acknowledge the storehouse of power they contained. The knife in his belt, hand carved from yet another horn was the only thing he knew of that could actually harm a dementor. A fact he routinely promised to share with the world at large should they not agree to his terms.

Small specks of darkness could be seen from a distance. There were five of them. "Good I brought enough offerings," he thought. They moved slowly hovering perhaps ten feet above the water. He began to feel the first twinges of despair from their presence. From his spies, he knew that in their presence both he and Harry Potter heard the exact same thing, his voice gloating to Lily Potter before he killed her. Yet another way the two were intertwined, but for wholly different reasons. The boy obviously was terrified of the loss of people so closely connected to his life and for him – it was the realization of defeat. Complete and utter humiliation. He had been so powerful,

only to be undone by a toddler. Apparently, the powers that be had been offended enough to not only bring about his defeat, but to do it in such a manner could only be considered cruel.

Listening to the cries of Lily Potter at the back of his mind, he summoned his patronus. The ethereal serpent coiled protectively around him. Feeding him warmth to fight the cool terror wafting before them. A glance over his shoulder and he saw some of his 'fearless' followers cramming chocolate into their mouths. Peter had a bar halfway to his face, but seeing his gaze upon him refused to bite into it.

The five dementors hovered about ten feet in front of him in a semicircle. He stepped back and signaled to his soldiers. "Send the offering!"

As one the ten muggles stood and walked forward. Two knelt in front of each dementor. They began to shake as the unnatural terror began to overcome the imperious curse. Like rabid animals the dementors descended on their feast. Most of his heartless killers turned away rather than witness such a great violation of the living spirit. Bella looked on with a look of hatred and terror, but would not turn away. Again, Peter surprised him. He watched as he munched on his chocolate bar, as if watching a dinner show. By the end two of the muggles had completely broken free and had managed to crawl towards him before they collapsed in paralyzing convulsions.

The offering had been consumed. It was time to get to the negotiation. Negotiation with dark creatures was always a risky proposition; the most important fact was to get into the mindset of the creature you are attempting to deal with. As you are trying to parlay a deal with a race of creatures, you must understand what that race want. In this case it was fairly easy. He had ten soulless husks littering the ground that demonstrated precisely what dementors want. They sustain themselves by feeding on terror, much like his forced diet of unicorn blood. To truly nourish them requires feasting on the soul. It is very straight-forward with dementors. Giants and trolls on the other hand rarely have a clue what they want. Half the negotiation process revolves around getting the barely intelligent brutes to realize what they actually desire, but bargaining with trolls and giants was what

Lord Voldemort had Death Eaters for. Vampires and werewolves sought more fanciful goals like 'equality', though some just wanted to be on the forefront of any slaughter.

He pointed at Peter. "Wake the squib and bring him here. Do not use the imperious curse."

Peter complied, dragging the groggy man with his enchanted hand and dropping him at his master's feet. Peter retreated five paces, but not all the way back to the rest of group of death eaters. Voldemort arched an eyebrow – wondering if his little student was trying to learn some perverse form of terror by being in the presence of these floating horrors. Two dementors swooped forward each grasping the arm of the terrified squib, who had enough magical spark within him to just barely perceive the creatures floating around him. The Dark Lord's patronus soundlessly hissed opening its jaws wide in warning when one of the pair approached too closely.

The squib was dragged back to a third dementor. This one leaned in for a kiss, but after a second of drawing at the man's essence, it stopped. Without warning, it exhaled not the silvery spirit of the man, rather a blackish mist directly into the squib's face. The doomed man's body quaked and his free limbs thrashed desperately for a few seconds before going limp.

The squib's voice was more of a moaning whisper, "What is it you desire Lord Voldemort?"

"The service of your kind." He answered.

"This is more than you have previously demanded. In other times you only sought our inaction while you freed your ilk. We prefer those terms."

"You know the ministry will only overlook so many indiscretions from your kind, before their trust in you fails. You cannot hope to remain neutral."

A pause while the group of dementors looked back and forth amongst one another, followed by more black mist. "What is it you offer for our services?"

“Freedom of a sorts. All the muggles you desire. There seems to be an inexhaustible supply of them - millions on this island nation alone. I will ask you to strike at wizards and witches on occasions, but for the most part I ask that you kill the non-magical folk in great numbers. My enemies will be forced to expend their resources trying to stop you.”

No answer was immediately forthcoming. Voldemort decided to press onward. “I was also hoping to once again perform the joining ritual.”

The two dementors holding their translator did nothing noticeable, but the other three drew themselves up in what could only be described as an angry rage. More black mist was breathed into the face of the man.

“No! You were told at the time that the joining was to be done only once. You will have to find another way to escape death’s embrace this time! Ask not for this again! You have been warned.”

“Very well.” He said not surprised by their refusal. “I withdraw that request. Do you agree to the other terms?”

“We desire something larger than this land as our permanent feeding ground.”

“Indeed, perhaps the continent of Africa? It is many times the size of England and possesses a much larger population base. There is also considerable strife in that area of the world, which could improve the taste of your food.” Voldemort offered knowing that it also possessed dense jungles, desert wastelands and other less than desirable features. In the back of his mind an interesting picture of a swarm of dementors attacking a Nundu. It ranked right up there with Siberia amongst places he would send others to conquer.

“Your terms are acceptable. What are your commands?” The dry rasp of the translator said. The wretched soul would probably only last but another five minutes. Much like negotiating with the goblin clans, it was imperative to finish the deal quickly. Goblins merely like the feel of swift deliberations. With dementors it was a necessity, as the translators keep dying. Briefly his mind pictured him up in front of the DADA classroom answering some first year’s question.



“Mr. Voldemort sir, how exactly do you talk to a dementor?”

“Well Timmy, first you should bring a few worthless muggles as an offering. At least one for every dementor is appropriate. Next you will want a squib, wizard or witch. Wizards and witches last longer, but it seems like a perfectly good use for a squib.”

Shaking himself out of his momentary reverie, “You will take wands to my loyal servants. They will have a note attached informing them that tonight they will be free. Half your forces will stay, to assist with my assault on the island. The rest of your forces may attack the muggle fishing villages with impunity. Spread yourselves out and force the ministry to dilute their strength.”

“As you wish Lord Voldemort.” The translator said. Two minutes later he convulsed and expired.

“Our business here is completed. Back to our headquarters to finalize the assault.” Voldemort said before he apparated away. Soon there were only 11 dead bodies on a cliff. When discovered the next day, would be a mere footnote in the muggle newspapers, which speculated on the cause of so many deaths along the coastline. Most attributed it to rumors of death cults or gas leaks.

------(Scene Breaks are starting to grow on me!)-----

The foursome exited from Mrs. Figg’s fireplace. The old woman was not around, but as usual there was a small hoard of cats. Susan looked at Harry for an explanation. He merely shrugged his shoulders. Stepping out into the evening air, Harry looked at Bill.

“So, were you part of the whole ‘Lets Marry Harry off to Ginny crowd’?”

“No. I didn’t know about it, but I honestly wouldn’t have been opposed to you as a brother-in-law.” Bill answered grinning at him.

“Thanks. I guess. Now that we are away from Dumbledore, I would really like to know why you objected to my emancipation Remus?”

"I was there when James got his news. He didn't take it very well and after all that you have been through lately, I was convinced that you would not handle it very well. I appear to have misjudged you. I apologize."

"Bloody hell! I have spent the better part of five years trying to convince Snape that I am not my father! Now I have to convince you as well?" He asked incredulously. "Any other reasons?"

Remus paused for a moment. "Albus had told me that he strongly opposed it. We did not believe that Sirius would have included such a provision."

"Maybe he believed I could handle it?" Harry returned with a sarcastic tone.

"Perhaps the painting does know and is waiting to be alone with you to tell you." Bill offered hoping to calm things.

"You might be right Bill. Did Dumbledore ever tell you what was in the Department of Mysteries?" Both shook their heads no.

Harry thought for a moment. "Let's go back inside Mrs. Figg's house for a moment."

Harry led them back in. Once inside they sat at the small kitchen table. Bill placed a privacy charm so that no one could hear their conversation. Susan looked at Harry.

"Do you want me to hear this or should I wait outside?"

"I would rather you heard it now. If we are going to be serious, then you need to know this now and make your decision. I should have told you earlier, but there was already too much drama." Harry said ignoring the shocked looks on the other two wizard's faces.

"Okay." She answered realizing that this was one of those fundamental truths about 'Harry's World' while thinking 'Be careful what you ask for Susan.'

"Since when are you to dating?" Bill sputtered.

“This morning, but we didn’t really want to announce it with everything going on.”

Harry saw the frown on Bill’s face. He was smart enough to know that this revelation would not be well received by the female Weasleys. Harry decided to add that to the growing pile of things he now considered to be someone else’s problem and not his.

“Alright how your mom and Ginny take that really isn’t that important right now. This is. The item in the Department of Mysteries was a prophecy. I won’t bother repeating it, but in a nutshell it says me or Voldemort – one of us kills the other.” Harry took a moment to let it sink in. Bill and Remus were wide-eyed in shock. Susan nodded at him and stood up and gave him a hug.

“Are we the only ones who know?” Remus said slowly.

“Well Dumbledore knows. Voldemort knows the first half of the prophecy not the last part where only I can kill him and vice versa. Other than that, yeah you guys are the first I have told. My guess is Sirius knew and he figured that I needed to be my own man.”

“Harry, I ...” Remus started.

“Don’t mistake this for forgiveness, Remus. If you think for a minute that I am just going to forget what you did back at Gringotts, you have another thing coming. At least next time when you stab me in the back, you will have all the information. Come on. Lets get this over with.”

As they walked towards the Dursleys, Susan grabbed his hand. She smiled at him. Bill and Remus broke off to start examining the wards. The werewolf’s posture was noticeably slouched.

“So is that the biggest Harry Potter secret? I just want to prepare myself if there is anything else coming my way.” She tried to add a touch of humor to her question.

“Yeah, I think that about covers it. I am waiting for the day when, someone tells me that I am really Voldemort’s son or some rubbish like that. So, after hearing all that do you still want to be my girlfriend?

Seriously, take a moment and think about it. The most powerful wizard in the world wants me dead. I wouldn't blame you if you wanted out."

"Harry, he wasn't exactly paying me a social call when he stopped by. He killed my family and was probably going to make some death eater's love slave. I don't believe he would leave me alone."

"But if you are close to me, he will go out of his way to get you."

"He will come after me anyway. Might as well give him a good reason." She leaned in and kissed him. For a moment it seemed like just a quick kiss, but there was an underlying tenderness beneath it.

Harry broke it reluctantly. As much as he was enjoying it, there were questions to be asked and answered. As he rang the doorbell, he turned back to Susan. "Thanks. You a good influence on me. I think everyone was waiting for me to fly off the handle, between you and occulmency. I seem to have a grip on things. I don't know what you have heard about my relatives, but the reality is far worse."

His cousin Dudley opened the door. His lips twisted into a sneer when he saw Harry. The sneer changed into a frown, when he looked at Susan. He turned his head back into the house.

"The freak is back!"

"Hello Duds. Nice to see you as well." Harry said stepping inside.

Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were in the living room. Vernon was reading the newspaper and Petunia had been engrossed in a magazine article. Both were now regarding him with a scowl on their faces.

"Thought we were done with you for the summer boy. What happened did they send you back?"

"No. I just came from the reading of my parent's will. I have been emancipated. The magic that protects this house will fail soon. I figured you should know, so you can leave. The people who want me

dead won't care if you don't like me. They will kill you just to irritate me."

"Your parent's will ..." Vernon started looking at Petunia who had dropped her magazine and paled.

"Yes. Funny thing too, my dad left you three million pounds instead of just two million. The goblins said the transfer will take place tomorrow. The letter he left me gave me the impression that he felt guilty about whatever happened. Since I won't be getting any straight answers from the magical folks, I figured that I would ask the two of you for some answers, seeing as this is probably the last time we will probably ever see each other." Harry said watching his aunt faint.

Vernon's expression clouded over. That in itself surprised Harry. Normally, Vernon Dursley was an emotional billboard. It had always been easy to determine what the large man was thinking. Dudley had rushed over to his mother and was glaring at Harry, wondering if he had used any of his magic on his doting mother.

After considering things for a moment Vernon gestured to the loveseat. "Sitdown Potter, your friend too. Don't know your name Miss. He never was one for proper manners."

Harry started to say something, but Susan cut him off. "My name is Lady Susan Bones."

"So you're not one of those Woolseys that usually come here?" Susan huffed slightly at Vernon's question. Days later, Susan would actually chuckle when recalling the story to Hannah.

"No, I most certainly am not." She said taking her seat.

"Well let's just see how much I can tell you. Your mother and the old man put a curse on us to prevent us from saying anything to you about this. Since I can tell you about the curse now, I reckon that it is broken. They showed up one night with your dad in tow and pretty much told us how it was going to be."

Vernon paused pouring himself a brandy before continuing. Petunia was once again conscious and Dudley had run into the kitchen to

fetch her a glass of water. Susan noted that at no time did they ask if she or Harry had wanted anything, yet they had the nerve to chide Harry about his “manners”.

Taking a long sip of his drink, Vernon continued. “They said an evil wizard might be after you and that they needed to protect you from him. Well, we pretty much told them to go to hell or wherever it is you folks go. They didn’t like that answer much. Your mother implied that refusing was not an option and told us that we could do this the easy way or the painful way. From the look in her eyes, I think she would have preferred the painful way. Fortunately, your dad stepped in. I have said a lot of nasty things about your old man over the years, but in truth he wasn’t such a bad guy. He said he didn’t like this one bit, but he offered to make it worth our while to cooperate. That’s where the money came in. We agreed on a price. I was in my twenties back then. The promise of a couple of million seemed so easy back then, if I had known the pain and suffering, I have made them do the painful way. They did their little ceremony and you were bound to your aunt, well almost. They said they would do the last little bit if and when they had to.”

Harry normally would have been screaming at his uncle by now. Thankfully, his occulmency combined with Susan’s presence and his genuine need to hear this information allowed him to overcome the burning desire to show his uncle a little bit of gratuitous magic. His face merely flushed a bit. The greasy bastard would be proud.

Vernon had drained his glass and poured himself a refill. “Well apparently they needed to, now didn’t they? So, sure enough you show up at our doorstep. That’s when the real trouble began. You never knew this and we couldn’t tell you, but Petunia was two months along and just beginning to show. Not two days after you show up, she loses the baby. Okay, tough life you want to say and it happens all the time. We tried to put it behind us and try again. So we did and everytime, she lost the baby by 10 weeks. Those three little angels on the mantle, the ones she doesn’t let anyone touch, well that one is Cassie, the middle one is Vernon Junior and the last one we were going to call her Hope. We went to doctors and specialists. There was no real reason for it they concluded, but we knew it was whatever magic protecting you. You were about five, when we had

that headmaster of yours out here, brought one of your doctor types with him and they checked on Petunia. Sure enough the magic was behind it. Said he was real sorry. Said it was an unfortunate complication. Had a little twinkle in his eyes like I was supposed to believe him. I'd been in sales for almost ten years by then and I could smell a goddamn lie when he acted like he didn't know beforehand."

Harry took this all in with a gulp. It was starting to become too much. Petunia was crying openly. Dudley simply sat next to her looking confused and angry. It made him look constipated. So many years Harry had slept in that little cupboard always wondering, 'Why do they hate me?' and here it was in plain English.

"But your kind wasn't through with us just yet. We accepted that there weren't going to be any more Dursley's in this house. You and Dudders were about to head off to school, so Petunia wanted to get back to her law degree. She was going to start classes again, but surprise the old bastard says she can't. He said Petunia was what you call a squid. No, that's not it! Oh bloody hell! Who cares! Anyway, she has a tiny bit of magic in her. Well turns out those protections are a two way street. You both charge em up. Apparently, you have a lot of magic, because you could charge em right quick enough! Petunia on the other hand couldn't. She had to pretty much stay in the house. We weren't allowed to be away from it for more than a few days until you were five. By the time you were seven, we could actually go on a proper vacation. But what is worse than that was watching my beautiful intelligent wife stuck here like a prisoner. Can't work! Can't have anymore children to raise! We decide to adopt and guess what? Not enough bedrooms. Well we just decide to get a new house. Then it turns out that these ruddy protections bound us to this house. So there I am - having to turn down promotions from the company I didn't want to work for in the first place. Watching the people I trained become my managers. I was just there until Petunia could finish law school, but apparently we sold our souls and our unborn children to you stinking bastards! Everytime, I stared at your face I knew it!"

By now Vernon Dursley's righteous anger premeated the den. He finished his second drink and stared into the glass. No one spoke until finally he said his last chilling remark.

“Did you ever wonder why I didn’t just kill you Harry? I’m sure it probably crossed your mind didn’t it. So many nights, I sat up and thought about it. Just go in wring your skinny little neck, but I knew that that bond tied my Petunia to you. I had a good idea that if you died, then she would to. It was the trifecta in their little wizarding package deal. They would take me away and Dudders would have to live with my sister. By that time, I figured had made it this far, just hold out a bit longer and we could be free. Why do you think we didn’t want you to go to that school? Your aunt listened to her sister’s stories about classes where you learn how to hurt each other with your magic and how sometimes bad things happened to people there. Well if you went out and got your stupid arse killed it might kill her too.” After saying that Vernon hurled his empty glass into the fireplace making everyone jump. He stormed passed them and went into the kitchen.

Petunia had recovered her composure. “Dudley, say good bye to your cousin and then go upstairs and pack. We will be leaving this place. When the protections are gone these people will show up and destroy this place won’t they Harry? That’s what I thought. Take only what you really want. We will have plenty enough to replace anything else thanks to your Uncle James.”

Dudley sneered at Harry for a moment and headed up the stairs muttering “Good riddance” under his breath. She waited until he was all the way up the stairs before continuing.

“I am sorry Harry. I am sorry for many things. Mostly, I am sorry that you became the symbol for all that was wrong and unfair in this life. You were the cause and yet you were not responsible. Hating you was easy - much too easy. While your father and Vernon were dickering over how much, Lily pulled me aside and said if I didn’t do it, she would bind you to Dudley and her studies said that I could survive it, but she wasn’t so certain about the effects on another child. The nerve of that bitch coming in here and threatening my child! She was probably the reason your kind passed laws preventing children from using magic away from school. They didn’t have those laws back then, I guess with your little war going on and whatnot. She would come home and dazzle mother and father with her tricks and then when they weren’t looking she would do things to me. I got to



see the side of Lily nobody else did. The little girl that got what she wanted, whatever the cost!" The venom in her shrill voice hissed in the room.

Harry had taken this all in stride. He was so used to them bad mouthing his parents. He was busy analyzing this and looking for any falsehoods. Regrettably, he could find none. Finally he asked the question he had needed to ask her.

"Did she love my father?"

"I don't know. She came back after her fifth year and had a long talk with mother and father. Seems despite how talented and wonderful everyone told her she was, that her being born to normal people was going to hurt her when she left that damn school of yours. She did not take that very well and said that she would find a way to get into their little 'exclusive club'. Next thing you know, she is seeing your father, whom she had always dismissed as a something of a hooligan up until then. Shortly afterwards he loses his parents and they get engaged. My parents died in a 'gas leak' as the newspapers report it and after the funeral I find out it was your mother's enemies that did it to provoke your parents. I only saw your mother twice after that and the last time was right here where she threatened my Dudley. So, I am not the person to ask this question to. So now you have your answers. Please leave. I have packing to do." She stood.

Harry and Susan both stood. He looked at his aunt. "I am sorry for what you suffered Aunt Petunia, it seems we are both victims. Hopefully, you can go somewhere and find the happiness you want, maybe its not too late for you and Vernon to try again after the magic is fully gone, but if you are looking for sympathy from me after the way you acted you are sadly mistaken. Every one of you was an adult and you took it out on me – a defenseless child. You may have been bullied into it, but that is no excuse! Goodbye Petunia Dursley." The universal truth occurred to Harry, bullies are not born they are created. The wizarding world had a great deal of responsibility for the Dursleys, almost as much as they did themselves.

"Harry, before you go I would like to know one last thing. Now that you are an adult, will you have to get married like your father?"

Harry nodded as she continued and turned to Susan, "So I take it you are his intended?"

Susan certainly was not prepared for that question or even the ramifications of that question. She wanted to answer. Her mouth would not work - the sheer insanity of the question! Suddenly it hit her. Harry would be married in a year and a little beyond that, she would be married. The odds of them being to each other were, were, were ....

Harry came to her rescue with three words that would forever change her life. Taking her hand he looked at his aunt.

"Yes she is." He said quietly. Susan was stunned and could only nod.

"I figured as much. Seems nice enough, your kind I suppose? Remember what your kind is capable of. Even the ones all of you consider heroes, like my dear sister." She said showing them the door. He looked at Bill who nodded and mouthed 'two days' at him.

"Bill says the wards will be gone in two days. To be safe, I suggest you be gone in thirty-six hours. Good luck Aunt Petunia and to mimic my cousin good fucking riddance. Pray our paths never cross again or you might see what I am capable of. Remember that I could have just as easily not come back and let them kill you. Think about that every night. Come on Susan, let's go."

They were halfway back to Mrs. Figg's when Susan finally found her voice. "You didn't have to say that to her."

"Huh, I enjoyed threatening her. If anyone deserves it ..." He looked at her.

"No the part about me being your intended. You didn't have to do that." She said slightly exasperated.

Harry stopped and looked at her. "Listen, I offered you a chance to run off when I told you about Voldemort. You didn't. My friends don't seem like my friends so much anymore. They seem like conspirators in some great plot. I have people trying to control my life, who have no business trying to do so. Ginny has gone from not being able to

speak to me, to stalking me like that Romilda Vane girl, except she has a small army helping her. I will be honest with you Susan. I like you. I respect you. You are not trying to control me, or if you are you are doing a good enough job that I don't notice it. I don't know if I am in love with you, but you have been the one thing I have been able to count on lately. When I asked you to trust me, you trusted me. Today, I learned that both my new girlfriend and I have to get married. That means either I let you go, or I go with my gut just like my dad said. My gut says pick a friend who will support me. You make me feel good. I will take a friend, who I respect, makes me feel good and has done nothing but support me over some desperate grab at something I am not sure I am capable of feeling. So that's where I stand. If you are planning on falling in love with someone else soon, let me know, but I don't see how I could do much better."

Not only was Susan incapable of speech, but coordinated movement had become problematic. She half stumbled and half lunged at him. She grabbed him. She crushed him to her and sobbed into his shirt.

"Do you mean it! Do you really mean it? Of course I will! We can make it work! I know we will!" She was babbling and she knew it, but words kept coming out of her mouth. Mercifully, Harry stopped her by kissing her.

Harry felt a surge of warmth as he had stumbled through his speech. He would forgive her for the bone-crushing hug. It had a rough day for them both. When he kissed her she kissed him fiercely. Harry hadn't really spent time dreaming of moments like this. He wasn't sure if it was the real thing or two people struggling to find something to hold onto. Either way it felt good – damn good. He saw Remus and Bill approaching them, when the pain hit him. In his euphoria he had let his mental shields slip. It hadn't hurt like this in a long time. Voldemort was stronger than before. Harry could feel it and he could see it in his mind as he sagged in Susan's arms. Remus reached him first as Harry clutched his scar.

"Azkaban – he's taking Azkaban."

## Chapter 10 – Azkaban on the brink

Darkness had fallen across the tiny island containing the wizard's prison Azkaban. It was a dark and foreboding place. The prison had its own mystique about it. Until recent times, it was considered impenetrable, escape proof and quite possibly a tiny piece of hell that had been transported into the North Atlantic. After the escape of Sirius Black three years ago and last year's mass escape, the reputation had lost a bit of its luster. Still the hostile weather chilled a person's bones even in the summer. The presence of over 100 dementors reinforced the negative atmosphere. If a normal human being could have perceived the island, they would see the fog and mist surrounding the prison like a thick cloak pulled tight. On the northern side of the island a rusted out hulk of a World War Two German U-boat could be seen. If a creature such as a dementor could celebrate, the day those muggle submariners ran aground was a feast of grand proportions. The aurors manning the prison had been too slow to understand what had happened. By the time they arrived, there was no one left to save. Shortly afterwards, the wards were extended to reach below the surface of the water.

Truly, some thought that structures such as Hogwarts and Azkaban were actually alive. If such were the case, Hogwarts would be a gentle school marm carefully guiding her charges into adulthood. Azkaban was the cruel deviant child, who had a reputation for playing with dead things.

The aurors of Azkaban worked twelve-hour shifts. The extra pay was good. Four days on shift followed by four days off. Shift change from days to nights was every two weeks. The majority of Azkaban's aurors were young, single and inexperienced. There were a few of the older more experienced aurors there as team leaders. Despite the presence of the dementors, most enjoyed their work out here. There was ample time to practice dueling. The team leaders, who for various reasons no longer wished to be a field agent, mentored their subordinates whenever possible passing on tips and tricks of the trade. In fact, the Auror Training Academy would often recommend that some of the less than stellar cadets spend a year or two 'on the rock' to hone their skills, before proceeding to active fieldwork. Since

the ministry had acknowledged the Dark Lord's return, they had raised the number of aurors on each shift from twelve to sixteen.

While the aurors handled most of the prisoner interaction, the actual day to day operations were handled by a staff of house elves. They set about their tasks happily, knowing to stay well away from the dementors. Fine meals were prepared for the aurors, not so fine for the prisoners. Every once in a while when a new house elf joined the staff, it would take some time to convince the confused creature that the 'bad witches and wizards' do not deserve the level of service normally expected from a house elf and that they only needed to have their cells cleaned on a weekly basis.

In Azkaban, there were two categories of prisoner – short timers and lifers. The short timers had done something and had been awarded a stint on the island. They were expected at some point to rejoin society and that the stay on the island would correct the criminal behavior that had landed them there in the first place. Generally a short timer's lot in life was better than the lifers. The cells were slightly larger, the food slightly better, meals were served with the other prisoners allowing some interaction and first selection from the limited library; which mostly consisted of history books, herbology guides, fictional tales, and other assorted topics. A significantly smaller number of dementors roamed the hallways, which also seemed to make life a bit more acceptable for the short timers. Once per month, they were allowed to receive correspondence; parchment only, no packages, and it was thoroughly screened by curse breakers on the mainland before being delivered to the island. There was even the possibility of a visit, if the correct ministry personnel were given suitable 'incentive' to allow such.

For the lifer, things were not so good. The cells were much more dank and cramped. They were also on the windward side of the island and the elements were less than forgiving. Benefits were almost non-existent. Meals were given in the cell. Exercise consisted of whatever the prisoner chose to do within the confines of their cell. Visitations were almost unheard of, for they required not only money, but well placed connections. Except for the odd Ministry employee, the last human beings these wretched souls would see were their auror guards. More dementors roamed the hallways and the sounds

of the terrified and insane were not silenced beyond their cells. Until recently, the only release for your typical lifer was the sweet embrace of death. The fortunate ones finally expired from pneumonia or other ailments when their magic finally gave up trying to heal them, the not-so fortunate ones were administered 'The Kiss'. Some of the more sadistic wardens had made it a spectacle when one of their charges was kissed. They made all the other prisoners watch as a lesson for the short timers and a promise for the lifers.

Currently there were forty-three short timers and nineteen lifers residing at the prison. Fourteen of the lifers were known Death Eaters. Four of the remaining five were just simply killers; after all, not all killers are Death Eaters. The last lifer was a bit of an enigma, in the muggle world she would be considered a 'political prisoner' a victim of a corrupt ministry. She had been a prime candidate to replace the previous minister, but woefully unprepared for the lengths to which Cornelius Fudge would rise or sink to – depending on one's interpretation. Sadly, there was a scandal involving murder and betrayal. The lady had protested her innocence and decried this as an example of dirty politics at its worst, but the amount of evidence against her was both staggering and well manufactured. Six long years had sapped her of her righteous fury and her frayed grip on sanity could only be described as tentative at best.

Though there were many barred windows in the prison, few bothered to look out them. On the rare occasions when the fog had lifted the water was everywhere to be seen. Perhaps during daylight, if you strained your eyes you might see the tiny black specs of the dementor guardians circling the inside edge of the wards a half mile out to sea. That is what one would see on any other occasion but this one. Tonight would be different. Lord Voldemort was coming to Azkaban.

Had you approached a normal everyday witch or wizard and told them the "Dark Lord" was in Azkaban, it would normally be a cause for many cheers and nights of celebration. Unfortunately, it was the way in which he came that would banish any thoughts of reverie. He was coming willingly, with a point to prove and he most certainly was not coming alone!

The assault group hovered thirty feet off the waves, most clinging to their brooms in the swirling wind. A cluster of broom riders circled each of the four magic carpets. Three of the four carried a wizard and a stunned troll. The fourth bore three wizards huddled at the center. Three additional wizards hovered at edges of the carpet on brooms awaiting their instructions. Voldemort laughed at the irony that magic carpets were illegal in Britain. Yet another example of the corrupt government run by professional politicians that represented no significant threat to him. The purebloods possessed virtually all the hereditary votes, but most could not be bothered to actually show up for all the votes and procedures. Instead, they had representatives who voted for them. Some of the more powerful families like the Malfoys and those who wished to dabble in the world of politics represented themselves. Until Lucius's unfortunate capture, he directly or indirectly controlled twenty percent of the hereditary votes. His support ensured a measure's passage and his opposition made the measure's passage dubious at best. These family representatives were well positioned to receive gifts and monetary contributions from influential business concerns seeking favor. One such powerful group consisted of broomstick manufacturers, who through various backroom deals had managed to ban magic carpets from Britain. They had acted quickly to prevent their product from being relegated to sports enthusiasts and speed freaks. Lucius merely reminded executives of the Nimbus Corporation of his firm support for the continuance of that ban and like clockwork, seven brand new Nimbus 2001 brooms were delivered to his estate. Similar agreements for goods and services reigned supreme through the Wizengamot. The Weasley family effectively gave their two family votes to Dumbledore in exchange for free tuition for their children.

Lord Voldemort hovered at perhaps fifty feet. He rode neither broom nor carpet. Twenty years ago the abomination was a dragon, a common welsh green to be precise. Now it was simply the finest bit of necromancy he had ever performed. Though it no longer possessed its flaming breath, it never tired. The other advantage was its complete obedience and absolute lack of concern for its own welfare. It was a thing and as such it could be repaired if damaged. The monster's wings were enchanted to produce not a sound as they beat relentlessly.

Smoothly he guided the undead beast into a slow descent bringing him even with the carpet and the cursebreakers. The six were Bolivian mercenaries - well they actually preferred to be called independent contractors. Most mercenaries were former aurors or other law enforcement types, who hired themselves out as bodyguards or hitwizards. They were abundant across Europe and as the war begins in earnest both sides would pay a premium for their services. Most were keeping an ear to the ground wondering when they should offer their services to the highest bidder. Greed was so very predictable and Lord Voldemort fortunately had deep pockets. The men and women hovering in front of him were slightly more specialized and expensive being cursebreakers. Ex-Gringotts employees, who opted to pool their talents and after several successful tomb expeditions entered the wand for hire business. He hovered near the leader, a thinly mustached man name Enrico Castillo.

"Enrico, would you care to tell me the cause of our delay? I do believe the terms of our agreement stipulated that we would be past this point by now." Lord Voldemort asked tersely.

"Many apologies, the elements are proving to be slightly disruptive and our progress has suffered because of this. It will require a bit more time than originally thought." The man said.

"How much more time? Be certain of your estimate." Voldemort asked taking time to enunciate each word, turning each syllable into a threat enjoying the startled look in the man's eyes. The man gulped noticeably and said nothing for ten seconds

"One hour thirty minutes and we will have bypassed it sufficiently for you to get your forces in. If the weather stays as it is, it will take another six hours to drop the wards completely."

"What time does your watch say?"

"It is eight fifteen pm, my patron." The mercenary said formally.

"Then you shall have until 9:45. I begin killing your people at 9:46. One will die for every 10 additional minutes is required. Do I make myself clear?"



“Yes. We will be in long before then. Though I still do not understand why you wish us to completely break the wards. Surely your enemies will simply recast them?”

“Instead of worrying about my reasons you should be worried about your new deadline fool. If you must know, I will tell you this - who says I am going to leave them a prison to reuse? Now my high priced friend, in your case time is like blood flowing from an open wound. When you run out, you die. Best get back to work now.”

----- (Everyone Loves a Good Scene Break!)-----

Hannah Abbott was fidgeting rather than reading. Internally, she chided herself for not staying with her best friend. Now said best friend was somewhere out there on a ‘Harry Potter’ adventure. The problem with these adventures was that people tended to get injured around Harry – physically and emotionally. Merlin, even watching one of his quidditch matches was dangerous! No, she didn’t blame Harry. He was simply a nexus that attracted trouble. Her own crush on Harry had been abandoned in her third year. Justin more than filled that void, rather nicely in fact and with significantly less potential for bodily harm.

She looked around the room. Her sister Chelsea was trying in vain to strike up a conversation with Neville Longbottom. Neville had arrived at the safe house in good spirits. He and Harry were seen talking on a few occasions. Lisa’s brother, Kevin said that Harry had even shown Neville the fragment of Rudolphus LeStrange’s death eater mask and the two of them shared a morbid laugh over it and the way Neville had summoned the Knight Bus on top of a death eater. However, as the days past his cheerfulness faded and he had withdrawn. The largest blow had been when he had to go identify all of his dead relatives at the hospital’s morgue.

Hannah had been too busy helping Susan cope with her losses as well as Lisa and Mandy get over the death of Tony Goldstein. She had to delegate Neville to Chelsea. Her sister’s gift was more along the lines of a ‘projecting empath’, whereas Hannah’s limited gift was more like an ‘interpretative empath’. Chelsea could actually make people feel better and lift their spirits just by her presence; however in

a bad mood her sister could dampen even the Weasley twin's good nature. On the other hand, it was nearly impossible to lie to Hannah. The student body of Hogwarts last year began to refer to her as 'Hitwizard Hannah'. The nickname was well earned by her uncanny ability to catch her fellow students on Prefect patrols. By the middle of the year, her patrol path and schedule were well known to all four houses. She had been the target of an inordinate amount of pranks, few of them actually succeeded. Getting her to eat or drink something that had been tainted was well nigh impossible. She would actually play with a few of her would-be pranksters for awhile. She would almost eat the tainted muffin or drink the spiked drink, only to stop for some reason catching the exasperated look on their face. It was both too easy and too funny. The only ones that had ever managed it were the Weasley twins. Both of them were such accomplished liars they were able to fib without a trace of guilt or remorse. After her second time squawking as a canary, she simply stopped accepting anything from the twins.

As she continued surveying the room she saw Kevin, Lisa, Terry and Mandy engaged in a rather lively muggle card game called "Uno". Mandy Brockelhurst was shooting her boyfriend the 'gaze of impending doom' after she had just been hit with her second consecutive draw four. At least she had a wide variety of cards to choose from now. She envied the quartet. It was a painful reminder of what summer among friends should be like. She closed her eyes momentarily and tried to focus on their positive emotions, hoping for a momentary fix to relieve her own tension. 'We should be laughing and joking. We shouldn't be attending funerals and consoling each other.' She thought with a pang of regret. In all fairness, her parents were not too worried for Hannah and Chelsea. Professor Dumbledore had convinced the Abbotts to come saying how they could use their talents to help lift everyone's spirits at Number 12. Knowing her best friend in the world needed her, was all the encouragement Hannah needed. She knew Justin would understand. The rest of the library was empty. Normally, she would have expected Hermione to be asking for some peace and quiet while she studied. She figured the bossy Gryffindor was more likely to end up as Madam Pince than the minister of magic like everyone else expected. Today was different. She and Ron Weasley were elsewhere exploring their new relationship. Everyone sighed now full well that they did not have the

correct day in the betting pool. Someone out there was considerably wealthier. Though Hannah knew the 2 galleon bet she had placed on Susan as a joke was now going to make her 50 galleons richer! The two girls had exchanged a quick conversation on the way to Gringotts. Susan was even able to ignore Ginny 'the Leech' Weasley's attempts to smother poor Harry. Speaking of which, Leech was nowhere to be seen. She must have gone directly to her room to think over her next evil plot. Hannah sincerely hoped that she was there when the trollop got the news. The expression on her face would be worth the wave of anger Hannah would no doubt feel.

The will reading had gone much better than expected. Harry's presence strengthened Susan. It had been the right decision to send him up after Susan when Leech had her tantrum. Hopefully, Susan was able to return the favor during his ordeal. She should have accepted Harry's offer, but even from the next room she could literally feel the tension. Even her mother, who possessed but a tiny hint of the gift frowned and kept to the other side of the room.

'They both have a marriage clause. Urgh! Don't get your hopes up Hannah! It could happen though. Wouldn't it be great? Wait just a sec! If they do, then you get to spend a lot more time worrying about Susan and Harry! They will always be in danger! He will be running off to fight Death Eaters and she is too stubborn to let him go alone. This could be really bad for your emotional wellbeing. Damn! It will be like third year all over again!' Hannah continued arguing with herself on one hand happy and hopeful for her Susan, on the other scared that her friend might get more than she bargained for.

Her debate ended when a series of loud noises could be heard from downstairs. She dropped her book and headed towards the stairs. Already the sounds of Molly Weasley could be heard as she began to fuss over the new arrivals. As she got down into the kitchen, she heard Susan's voice.

"Sit down here Harry. Mrs. Weasley could you get me another washcloth? Harry's scar started bleeding when he had a vision."

"Susan, are you guys okay?" Hannah asked.

"I suppose, but Harry had a vision of Azkaban being attacked. Professor Lupin went to warn the headmaster and Bill went to warn the ministry. We used the floo to get back. Harry, do you want something to drink?"

"Water is fine." Harry said changing out the bloody washcloth on his forehead for the one given to him by Mrs. Weasley. Susan grabbed a glass and filled it from the sink. She paused for a moment and grabbed a potion vial from the holder.

"Here's the water and a headache remedy. Move the cloth and let me see if it has stopped bleeding." The kitchen was slowly filling up with the curious. Hannah thought it was amusing to watch Molly Weasley. She looked a bit flustered, like she wanted to charge right in and take over Harry's care, but Susan wasn't giving her any opening.

"What's the verdict Healer Bones?" Harry asked after washing the potion down with the water.

"It stopped bleeding and closed all by itself. Does it do that often?"

"Every once in a while, but only when the vision is really strong. Normally, I just end up throwing up. I just wish I could have vomited more on Uncle Vernon's car. Wonder if he will like my parting gift?"

"I am sure he will appreciate it Harry. It's the thought that counts. That reminds me, Trixie." Susan said and moments later the house elf appeared. "Can you get us something to eat? Sandwiches perhaps? Harry needs to get something solid in him and I could use a bite just the same."

"Thanks for writing the notes to Mrs. Figg. I hope she finds them and is gone before the protections fail."

"What happened mate?" Ron hopped down the last three steps into the kitchen. A somewhat disheveled Hermione Granger following behind him. He grabbed a roast beef sandwich of the tray Trixie had just appeared with.

"Voldemort is at Azkaban." Harry answered waiting for the gasps to subside taking a bite from his ham and cheese. "Bill is trying to warn

the ministry. Mrs. Weasley, could you use the floo and call Madame Pomfrey. She needs to be alerted and she can probably alert St. Mungo's without it looking too suspicious. Better call the twins too, in case he moves on Diagon Alley too." The mention of Molly's boys got her moving towards the fireplace.

There was a popping noise and Bill Weasley arrived. He looked a bit annoyed. He was a bit surprised that Harry had his wand out almost by reflex. "How long did you tell me the wards were going to last?"

"Forty-eight hours." He responded nonchalantly.

"Okay, what did the ministry say?"

"They denied anything was wrong at Azkaban, but from the alarms I could hear and the people running around, they knew. I saw Kingsley and Mad Eye. I offered to help, but they said that the ministry would get a little weird with non-ministry personnel running around their prison. So, if you are planning on a little sight seeing expedition, I would reconsider it."

"I'm a little disappointed, but if the ministry actually wants to take care of its own problems for a change, then who am I to argue? Sandwich?" Harry replied gesturing to the tray.

"Thanks. I'm famished." Bill said, greedily reaching for two.

"How did he get past the dementors?" Lisa asked.

"They probably switched sides. They've just been waiting for the right opportunity. How's every one's Patronus? We might need them in the near future." Harry knew that all the other DA students could make the mist shield except for Hermione's otter and Prongs. Ron had been close to a corporeal one, before they left school. He looked at his girlfriend/fiancée. He was still shocked he had actually done it. Everything he had said to her made complete sense. He had been convincing himself almost as much as he had been convincing her.

"I've never been able to get beyond the mist."

"Well, you're an adult now no time like the present. Let me see."

Susan drew her wand and made the motions. At her verbal command a weak mist emanated from her wand. She tried again this time with a louder voice. By the third effort, she practically screamed the incantation. If anything, the mist looked even feebler. She sagged in defeat.

Harry stood up. "Susan, stop. This is one of the spells where wand movement and verbalization don't mean anything." He drew his wand and held it perfectly still. Focusing on the recent memory of their kisses up in the loft and the smell of her hair. He barely spoke the incantation. Harry was rewarded with his patronus leaping from his wand. It walked around the room and stopped in front of Susan before vanishing.

"It's not about what is here or here, but what is in here." He said tapping his wand on his head, his throat and finally his chest. "Don't just think about your happy memory, try and relive it."

"Okay. I'll try it again." She said sounding a little confident in herself. Her efforts produced a solid looking mist. "Arrgh! So close!"

"What memory are you using? You might want to try a different one." Hermione chimed in.

"Baking with my mom. It usually resulted in a big flour fight." Susan said blowing air out of her mouth straight up at her bangs to vent a bit of frustration.

"Try a different memory. Don't take this the wrong way Susan, but that memory might not work for a while, until you have finished grieving. That might be holding you back." Hermione said carefully not wanting to offend Susan.

"Oh. I guess you are right. This is so frustrating!" She exclaimed.

Harry knew he could help her, but did he have the courage to pull it off. 'What the hell! Only Tommy can kill me.'

"Susan. I have found the best memories are the ones that not only have a feeling attached to them, but also had a touch, taste or smell associated with it. Do you trust me?"

Susan started to blush a bit. "I think I have said that on various occasions as of late." She said nervously.

"Okay, close your eyes." He said walking over to her. She complied. He waited for a moment and kissed her. He could feel the heat of her blush spreading. He was pretty sure he was blushing right now too, but he didn't care. A few gasps could be heard. After about five seconds he slid down and kissed her neck a little. She had her free hand on the back of his head and made a little gurgling noise. Keeping his hands on her waist he slid around behind her and continued kissing her neck. He moved up to her earlobe and in between nibbles he gave her his instructions.

"Keep your eyes closed. Focus on my voice. Feel my breath on your neck. Now, quit screwing around, stick your wand out and say the incantation."

"Expecto Patronum!" Harry heard the murmur in the room. He didn't have to open his eyes to know it worked. He did anyway and was rewarded with a misty looking stallion. When it snorted the vapors seemed to come out of its nostrils. Inside he felt slightly guilty. He hoped he would never have to admit to the fantasies he had last year where he had planned to use this technique to teach Cho how to do a patronus.

"Very nice, Susan. You just needed a little prompting in the right direction." Susan's normal half smile had changed into for lack of a better description a stupid grin.

Lisa broke the silence. In a teasing voice she asked, "So Harry. When we get back to school can you help me with my patronus?"

"Urm, ah, well ..." Harry stammered.

Susan answered for him. "He's taken. Get your own private instructor. Perhaps Ernie?" She was trying really hard to keep herself from looking directly at Ginny. Hannah had no such qualms. Ginny's face was flushed her mouth was open and she looked pretty angry. Sure enough, Hannah could feel the anger radiating off of her as Ginny ran upstairs. It was worth it to see her face. She would have to tell Susan later.

Ron asked the question everyone was dying to know. "How long have you to, ah well, been doing that?"

Harry squeezed her side and casually avoided the question. He had turned Susan around and was looking in her eyes. "If you ask me, not long enough, but I am working on fixing that." Susan rewarded him with another kiss.

While Ron was listening, he snuck a glance over at his mother. Today at the will reading, Ron had caught a rare glimpse of his mother's scheming nature. There were only a few times in his life that he recalled genuine anger on his mother's part. Mostly those had been directed at the twins. Though there was the very memorable instance of when Charlie had informed the family that he was giving up the chance to play professional quidditch. This initially made a huge smile appear on his mother's face only to fade when he started talking so enthusiastically about dragon handling. That was the same look he saw on her face now. Ron knew everyone considered him a bit thick – he was okay with it, but having roomed with Harry for the last five years he had come to know him pretty well. From the way he was acting at the will reading today. There was about as much chance of him dating Ginny right now as there was of him dating Pansy Parkinson. In between their 'snogging' time upstairs he had questioned his new girlfriend about her role in his mother's and sister's plans. She admitted that she was hoping Ginny and Harry would end up together, when she had asked him to say something to Harry on train at the end of school. Ron had gone along with it easily, because it meant that Hermione was not interested in Harry that way.

Hermione was trying to hide her thunderstruck expression. She knew Ginny was going to be irate. This was probably going to be a long night, which wasn't going to get a lot of sleep. She wanted to be happy for Harry, but she hope he wasn't doing this to just rebel against the headmaster. Hermione didn't want to jump to any conclusions until she had a chance to speak to Harry in private. That might be a problem; given that Harry wasn't too happy with her right now and that she didn't know how secure Susan was. After all Cho's jealousy imploded Harry's previous attempt at having a girlfriend. Hermione didn't have anything against Susan. She was a nice person. She could be good for Harry. They certainly seemed to have a bit of



chemistry going there. It reminded her of the chemistry experiment she and Ron engaged in for the last hour. She came to the conclusion that her dazzling intellect might not be able to solve this problem. Ginny, Harry and Susan may very well have to sort this on their own. Hermione glanced over at Ron. In typical Ron fashion, he shrugged his shoulders and grabbed the last sandwich off the tray.

“Well Harry, Fleur has been trying to get me to teach her the Patronus. I may need to borrow that technique. Glad my teacher didn’t want to do that though. There was a rumor that he played for the other team, but that is just gross.” Bill said chuckling. He too was worried about his mother and sister. He knew he was going to have to make some ‘big brother time’ soon for ‘Lil Red’. He could probably sneak up there under the pretense of going to the bathroom.

While Bill was considering his options, the fireplace roared to life. In the flames, he could see his old high school flame, Emmeline Vance. “Bill! We’ve got problems! The dementors have gone wild. They are attacking the coastal towns. The ministry isn’t responding and I am having problems getting in touch with Dumbledore. Can you assist?”

Bill looked over at Harry who nodded. “Keep the floo open. We will be there in a minute.”

His mother immediately started protesting. Bill just looked over at Harry. Harry was getting good at ignoring the Weasley matriarch. Bill decided he might want to borrow another of Harry’s lessons.

“Susan, its not the same summoning a patronus when there is a dementor right in front of you. Are you sure you are up for this?” Harry asked stopping her with a firm hand on her shoulder.

“Where you go, I follow. Any other silly questions?” Harry shook his head impressed with her resolve. He turned his gaze to his bushy haired friend.

“Hermione? Are you coming?”

“Harry, I am still underage. I can’t.” She said in exasperation. Something snapped inside of Harry.

“Of course you can! Do you think the ministry is going to try and come after you with so much to answer for right now? Their dementors are out there attacking people!” Harry felt the irony. Normally he couldn’t keep Ron or Hermione away. Now for a change, he was asking for her help. Maybe she felt vulnerable after her injury at the ministry? Maybe she was just scared? Harry no longer had time for maybes.

“Harry, I ....” She started looking uncomfortable with everyone’s gaze on her.

“Fine! You’re not coming. I get it. Accio Firebolt! Susan you and I need brooms. Bill and Emmeline can apparate. We can cover more ground that way. Stay low though and dismount to actually fight them. Stick to my flank. Don’t get separated. If you do red sparks! I don’t want you to get knocked off.” Susan nodded and summoned her Cleansweep Seven.

Harry knew he shouldn’t do it. Everyone said how he was acting more mature than he had ever been before. Unfortunately, he was still a teenager. As he headed towards the fireplace he shot Hermione a look. It was a look of betrayal – a look of friendship damaged. His words were an icy slap in her face.

“Come on. No one else is going to help us save the muggles. Let’s go. Must be my saving people thing.” He said heading into the floo knowing his verbal arrow had struck true.

----- (Scene Break Poor Hermione!)-----

“The wards have been bypassed. You are free to proceed!” Enrico said smiling, knowing he still had thirty minutes left on his estimate.

Lord Voldemort gestured to his followers and issued a simple command, “Attack!”

He watched the broom riders and carpets surge forward. He moved the dragon close to the cursebreaker’s carpet. Enrico’s smile faded as the dragons head hovered but two meters from him. Lifeless eyes stared at him.

“As a token of my good faith, I will not impose any of the penalties as stipulated Mr. Castillo. I suspect I will need your services again. However, I expect that the next time we do business together that your rates will be the same and not shall we say inflated.”

“Oh certainly, my patron. You are most generous. The wards will be completely down in another five hours.”

“They may also fail when the prison is destroyed. We shall do business again Mr. Castillo – until then.”

Lord Voldemort steered his mount away from the cursebreakers and towards the shimmering glow indicating where the wards had been compromised. He urged his monster forward and through. They were making a straight approach towards the high security area. He could already see the shapes of the dementors leaving the island. The ones still inside would soon begin attacking the aurors. The main objective was to free his captive followers. The secondary objective was to destroy the prison. One of his followers actually carried a magical camera. The destruction of Azkaban would be preserved for posterity and serve to demoralize his enemies. Voldemort figured that the only way he could send a stronger message would be either to sack the ministry or Hogwarts itself, all in due time. The pictures would find their way to the newspapers. The sheep would huddle in front of their wireless sets as they listened to the commentators speculate on the ramifications. They would cry out for someone to deliver them. He actually toyed with the idea of offering a truce to the wizarding world in exchange for the head of Harry Potter, just to see if they would go for it.

He approached the rocky shore hovered watching some of his servants circle in front of the prisoners windows. Inside, Lucius, Antonin and the rest would be breaking down their doors using their smuggled wands. He could already hear the faint detonations. He commanded his dragon to smash a hole into the prison wall at the base. He and five death eaters would enter here at the lower level to prevent reinforcements from the medium security ward. Intelligence told him that there were always three to four aurors on duty in the high security ward. The escapees or the dementors would see to them.

“Peter, take two and cutoff the next passageway! We want to control the central chamber. That will force them to portkey reinforcements to the other side of the prison. Move now!” He said watching Wormtail comply. He heard the alarms begin to sound. From tracking the response of the auror units back in London, Voldemort knew that it would be at least five minutes before the first aurors from the ministry would arrive. It was also nice to have a complete layout of the ‘invulnerable prison’; Lucius’s money was well spent.

He dismounted from his steed. When he sent word again the creature would begin to attack the structure in earnest to topple the north tower. That would block any apparitions and further restrict the areas where the ministry could deploy their aurors. Shaking his head for a moment, he felt the boy. The stupid whelp dropped his defenses. In their mental tug of war, Potter effectively let go of the rope causing both to stagger in their mind’s eye. Reestablishing his shields, he sent a forceful probe through the connection. His adversary’s hastily erected defenses buckled and he took a moment to enjoy the agony he was inflicting, but it was a mere distraction. He would not allow the boy to waylay him from tonight’s goal. There would be time to batter and abuse him later.

A cruel smile crossed his lips as he led the two death eaters towards the central chamber. Up ahead he heard screams and a couple of cries for a patronus spell. There in the central chamber were four aurors driving off the dementors in the hall, the lead one cursing in Spanish between his castings. Voldemort snapped his wand in an arc and loosed ‘The Bone Saw’. The auror must have sensed the magic, but it was too late. His feeble shield shattered and seconds later his wand arm was twitching on the ground with little sparks coming out of the wand as the appendage convulsed. The Dark Lord finished him off with a blasting curse as he casually conjured an absorbing shield for a reductor aimed at him. Before he could return the favor, the female auror fell to a killing curse cast by Peter. Voldemort looked for another opponent, but the two remaining aurors were already being double-teamed by his remaining followers.

----- (Scene Break)-----

At least Nymphadora Tonks' day had gotten better. The will reading had been awful. She had practically bit Harry's head off and Remus let her know that in no uncertain terms. She had meant to apologize to him, but he had run off with Bill, Remus and the Bones girl after laying into Dumbledore. Her werewolf would have some explaining to do and it was doubtful that he could resist her interrogation skills.

It had been years since she had spoken to Aunt Narcissa. Her mom was always telling her that she acted a lot like her aunt. She actually saw a bit of it today and realized that her mom hadn't been putting one over on her. When she grabbed poor Charlie's arse like that, Tonks darn near lost it. Oh he could handle dragons alright, but he looked completely out of his league.

She had left the reading and gone straight to auror headquarters with the information provided by her aunt. Second shift was on and the watch captain sent the rapid response team with her to the Malfoy mansion. Disguised as her aunt, she was able to capture the two death eaters that had been waiting for Narcissa's return. They had spent the next two hours recovering a veritable trove of dark artifacts. If he wasn't already in prison, her uncle would be hard pressed to explain all this. The Unspeakables were practically peeing their collective pants when they dropped that load of stuff off. She had returned to headquarters. The worst part of her job was the paperwork. She never seemed to catch up on it. After her tenth report, she was almost wishing for some kind of distraction to come along.

Be careful what you wish for ....

"Alarms at Azkaban!" Lars Anders shouted into the ready room. Dawlish looked up from the magazine he was reading.

"Drill?"

"Don't think so. First shift would've tipped me off."

"Saddle up kiddies! We're taking a trip to the rock. Get hot and loose. Standard deployment from rally point Merlin. Taber and Spinnet on point." Dawlish said grabbing his dragonhide vest off the back of his chair.

“Dawlish, need an extra body?” Tonks asked.

Dawlish was about to turn her down when the second set of klaxons sounded. Dawlish, Tonks and Anders locked eyes as they recognized the significance. A second set of alarms signified prison breach and that the situation was deteriorating quickly. There was a slight pang of fear in his gut.

“Right glad to have you Tonks! Change of plans. Rally point is Circe. Full combat deployment. I’m on point. Edwards, you are with me. You four advance in two by two. Curse on sight. Tonks, you any good on a broom? Good; you and Taber are on air patrol. One lap around and report back.”

Dawlish looked at the burly Swede, whom he constantly butted heads with. “Better get us some backup.”

“Marcia is already on it. Be safe out there.” Anders said watching the rapid response unit step onto the departure pad. The seven aurors formed a circle. Dawlish grabbed one of the three portkeys labeled ‘Circe’ and held it to the rest of them. Five seconds later they disappeared. Watch Captain Anders bolted into the next room where his assistant was already on the main floor with Auror Headquarters. From their six operators, mostly summer interns would begin floor calling all available aurors to respond to the emergency at Azkaban.

The team reappeared at rally point Circe. A sheltered area designed to allow them protection while they moved into position. Rally point Merlin was at the central hall and Le Fey was closer to the high security ward. Tonks and Karen Taber each grabbed a comet out of the broom locker and went airborne. Dawlish led the other four on approach to the medium security entrance. A house elf was waiting by the entrance for them.

“Bad Wizards all over the prison! All really bad wizards are free! Not so bad wizards are still locked away! Warden Fulton need more help than this!”

Dawlish looked at the terrified creature. “Is He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named here?”

The wide-eyed stare and furious shaking head of the house elf was all the confirmation Conrad Dawlish needed.

-- (Shift POV to Tonks)—

She circled the island counterclockwise. Karen would be circling clockwise. Tonks was no slouch in the sky, but Karen had been a chaser on Charlie Weasley's cup winning team. The broom was a late model comet, no better than the ones from her days from Hogwarts. She pushed herself up to around fifty feet as she passed over the rusted submarine. She was on the backside of the prison and sheltered from the elements. Up ahead she spotted something, several somethings. Three of them were trolls or small giants. They didn't bother her near as much as the dragon she spotted next to them. Three smaller shapes must be death eaters. They hadn't seen her yet. She dived down to the deck and picked up her speed. Her plan was to pop up at a high-speed throw the most destructive curse in her inventory and bank right down the cliff. If the dragon followed her straight down, she might be able to splash it. Tonks pulled up about fifteen meters out and fired off 'Ptolemy's sledgehammer' a powerful blasting curse. She could see two of the death eaters were hurt in the resulting explosion, but the larger targets were unaffected. To her horror, Karen rounded the corner a second later at high speed and was smacked out of the air like a rag doll by the dragon. Her body careened down the cliff and impacted on the rocks below. Tonks didn't have much time to mourn her as she saw the reason Karen had been flying so fast. The death eaters had a pair of wizards flying air guard and they had been chasing her right into the dragon. They banked left and turned on her tail. One went high and the other went low. Tonks knew from the tactic that the two had training. The wizard on the faster broom was the one who went low. He was going to chase her into the field of fire for the wizard who went high. She weaved and dived towards the rocks below, knowing that her pursuers were not flying late model comets like she was.

She dodged two curses and tried to build some speed. When she rounded to the windward side of the island her broom bucked hard as the strong winds hit her. Smiling, she realized this could work to her advantage as the faster brooms would be more disrupted. It also didn't hurt that she could become double jointed at will. She did a half

roll and clamped her knees and ankles tight to the broom shaft, so that she was flying upside down and fired a spread of stunners right as the lead pursuer hit the wall of wind and struggled to control his broom. One clipped the death eater in the shoulder. He fell from the sky to join Karen on the rocks below. 'That's for you freckles. Now let's see how good bogey number two is.'

She pushed his broom into a weaving climb as the pursuer's curses reached out for her each promising death. She swung around and headed towards the towers. Bricks and mortar exploded from the blasting curses, one of the chunks caught her in the head as she tried to shield herself from the shrapnel. Using her natural talents, she bent her arm at an impossible angle backwards and fired a jet of flame. Had the death eater flown straight through it probably would not have hurt that much. Far less than Tonks's throbbing head, but human instinct is a powerful force to counteract. The death eater went low as she fired an *Incarcerous* spell sending ropes from her wand forcing the death eater to overcorrect again. He was moving too fast and lost control slamming into the north tower. If the impact didn't kill him the fall was going to. 'Splat two.' She thought.

Tonks resisted the urge to do a victory barrel roll as she headed back towards the rally point. Dawlish would need to know what they were up against. The sooner she reported, the sooner she could check to see if Karen might still be alive. Concentrating on her talent she forced the gash on her head to close.

---- (Shift POV Lavender Brown – Intern Auror Dispatcher Grade 2) ---

For a gossip queen like Lavender Brown, there simply was no better job than Auror Floo Dispatcher. Parvati said she should have tried to intern at Madame Malkin's, but the information she picked up here was amazing! Hopefully, she would be able to continue this after school. Supervisor Tompkins was very pleased with her work. Her job was to answer the floo calls as they came in, and alert her supervisor to the nature of the caller's emergency. She took a great deal of pride in her work and felt that she was really doing something important.

Lavender had heard some very amusing stories, but also some that had scared her. The dispatcher next to her had taken the floo call



from the Smith residence the night Zachariah was killed. It was horrible! She never really liked the Hufflepuff boy, but to hear the screams coming from the fireplace were really disturbing. The aurors were too late to save anyone. It was three nights (well actually days, since her shift ended at six in the morning) before she got any sleep worth mentioning.

Tonight was very busy. She was currently using something called the alert bill. This parchment contained all the names and floo addresses of law enforcement personnel to be called in an emergency. She had actually talked to Professor Moody! He didn't remember her from class though. She stood aside as he came through her fireplace. Despite the protocol that he shouldn't! She sighed and waited for the disconnection, so that she could call the next name on her list, but the fire roared to life. She was about to pull the manual disconnect lever, but something stopped her.

"Priority one call from Azkaban Rally Point Circe!" Moody spun around and pushed Lavender back into her chair. He pulled the lever that her supervisor told her to never, ever pull. They call it the squawk box. It lets that conversation be heard by everyone in headquarter.

"Go ahead." Moody shouted.

"This is Tonks. Situation is out of control! Repeat situation is out of control! Death Eaters control the high security ward and the central chambers. Believe all high security prisoners are free and armed! Count one dragon and three trolls on east shore. Dawlish and the Warden are trying to hold at medium security dining area. Have received reports that Dark Lord is here! Request all available backup! Rally Point Circe is only staging area still in friendly hands. Merlin and Le Fey have been overrun! Moody we're in deep shit here!"

"Hold them girl! We will get there as soon as we can! Alright listen up! I want every auror who can sling a wand on the departure pad in two minutes! Move it you squibs!" Lavender had to admit that her professor had a way with words.

There was a mad scramble as people sitting behind desk pulled protective hide vests and caps on. Some were grabbing brooms off of a rack on the wall. Lavender watched the chaos. Moody waved to a

tall black man who was talking to man who looked a bit like Ron Weasley. 'Yup they must be related.' She thought. 'Ron always gets that look in his face when he is left out of something.'

She turned back to her fireplace and grabbed her list and placed the next fire call. Almost mechanically she made the next three calls. She was interrupted again when her fellow Gryffindor Colin Creevey called out to her from his fireplace. He had that 'I'm going to pee my pants' look on his face.

"Lavender! I just got a call from the coast near the prison! The dementors are attacking!"

"Ohmigod! Wait why are you telling me this?" She asked hesitantly fearing the answer.

"Uh Mr. Tompkins went with the others. The rest of us are only grade ones."

Lavender turned around to see the entire room empty. The knot in her throat dropped like a stone into her stomach. The other five interns looked at her expectantly. She didn't like this situation one bit. Even the woman who had been working the front desk for walk-ins was gone. She never wanted to be a leader, but she was put into Gryffindor for a reason.

"Okay here is what we are going to do. You three keep calling the people on the alert list. Colin, you keep an eye on the front desk. Becky, get a hold of the on duty department head at the ministry and let him know about the dementors as well as the prison. I think it is Amos Diggory tonight, check Mr. Tompkins desk. Colin, if you have to go handle something at the desk give your list to Eddie. Where did you say they were spotted? I know someone I can call. Eddie firecall St. Mungo's, they need to know."

A minute later she was speaking to her favorite cousin Emmeline Vance.

----- (Scene Break – Everyone still with me?)-----

Harry stumbled out of the floo connection, but not nearly as bad as usual. Maybe being angry helps your balance, either way he didn't care at the moment. Ms. Vance was looking out the window and talking with an older female. She looked at Harry rather with a confused expression on her face. The fireplace roared to life and Susan casually stepped out and brushed a tiny bit of soot off her arms. Harry would need to ask her for her secret at some point in time. Of course, his introduction to new modes of magical travel usually had about as much instruction as Occulmency with the greasy bastard. 'Here Harry grab this, it's a portkey.', or 'this is floo powder do this.'

"Harry, you shouldn't be here. What is Bill thinking?" Emmeline asked.

Harry started to answer, but Bill beat him to it. "Harry and Susan are both emancipated. Both can cast a corporeal patronus. I also have it on good authority that Harry's once drove away over a hundred by itself. Since Professor Dumbledore isn't available, he's the next best thing. Plus his instructional technique is rather unique." Bill couldn't resist adding with a grin making Susan blush and look away. Harry was more surprised at the compliment than embarrassed. He never gave much thought about how powerful some of his spells could be.

"Okay, you're the dark creature specialist. If you're satisfied with them, so am I. Dung will be here in a minute. Anyone else?" She asked not noticing the dark look crossing Harry's face.

"No. Just us." Bill said quickly. "Susan and Harry brought brooms. We can take them side-along up to the coast. Let's go ahead. Dung can catch up to us."

Emmeline said goodbye to her aunt and they apparated away. The town they apparated to was a sleepy coastal town. It was already after 10 pm. The town seemed a bit too quiet. The first few houses they approached showed no signs of life. They moved on cautiously. Harry stopped and closed his eyes. He could feel them, almost like one feels the atmospheric pressure drop before a storm. It was a small cluster of them maybe a dozen.

"Come on. About a kilometer that way." He pointed towards the center of town, while he mounted his broom. Susan followed suit,

while the other two disappeared with popping noises. Harry slowed and let Susan catch up to him. He dropped quick '*Notice Me Not*' glamour on the two of them, hoping that the muggles they might encounter would be affected. Drawing closer they saw the flashes of light and heard screaming. Bill and Emmeline were already fighting. Harry had to consciously fight against himself to make sure he didn't leave Susan by herself.

In the middle of an intersection is where they found the two order members. It was the scene of an auto wreck complete with two police cars, a fire truck and two ambulances. Victims lay strewn on the ground. From the screaming he knew they all hadn't been kissed. At least there was someone left to save. Bill was doing okay, but Ms. Vance was struggling. He couldn't quite make out her patronus, it looked like a small bird of some sort and it was barely corporeal. As he got closer, he summoned Prongs to charge into the fray. It was a good thing as the bird disappeared leaving Emmeline mostly defenseless. The quartet of dementors approached her but they faltered and scattered under the fierce charge of Harry's patronus. He gestured to Susan to help Bill, who was fending most of the rest with a very determined dog patronus. Harry knew from his conversations with Bill that it was an Irish wolfhound after his favorite long deceased family pet. He spared a glance at Susan to make sure her patronus formed. It did, though it looked about as solid as the bird, but Harry was proud anyway. By contrast Prongs almost looked real. Harry then checked on the muggles that were nearest to them. The female ambulance driver was still conscious, though it looked as if she was clawing at her face madly and foaming at the mouth. He stunned her and cast a series of healing spells to close the cuts on her face. She might have faint scars, but otherwise Madame Pomfrey would be proud of her most frequent guest. Her partner was gone as were both police officers four of the six firefighters. The other two were simply unconscious. Escorted by the ethereal manifestation of his father he moved up to check the auto wreck. From the tire marks the car had swerved violently into the van. He ran to the van. The man was still breathing and moaned when Harry got there. The fact he was unconscious probably helped spare him. Harry looked him over and fired off a diagnostic spell. He had lacerations on his arms and face from broken glass. Several of the man's ribs were either broken or bruised badly and his left leg where the impact was probably broken.

“What are you doing to my daddy?” He heard a voice ask. Harry had been so intent on checking on the man that he didn’t see the young boy in the back seat.

“I am checking him for injuries.”

“Bloody hell! Harry Potter?”

“Uh yeah who are you?”

“Jason Higgins. I’m in Ravenclaw. Were those dementors? All the policemen and firefighters just started screaming and running around.” The boy sniffed.

“What year are you in?”

“Going into my second year, sir.” Harry cringed at being called sir. That explained why he didn’t know what a dementor was.

“How are you able to do magic out of school?”

“Long story. Don’t you have you wand with you?” Harry said noticing that the father was awake and eyeing him through bleary unfocused eyes. Jason shook his head no.

“What are you talking about boy? What happened here? What’s with the light show?”

“Sir. I go to Jason’s school. See my friends over there. They are driving off the monsters. Your boy can see them even though you can’t. It’s not safe to be out and about tonight. We need to get you out of here.”

“Okay.” With that he cast the cleaning charm and all the glass fragments disappeared. He then cast several wound closing spells and the cuts on the man closed much to the father’s astonishment.

“I am going to try and fix the dent and we should be able to open the door. I can get your leg after that.” The man just nodded dumbly.

“Reparo!” He incanted while the deformed metal returned to its pristine condition. Harry turned and recast his patronus directing him to attack the few remaining dementors. The boy cried out while the man looked on in amazement. Harry shrugged and opened the driver side door.

“Okay this is going to hurt a bit. Are you ready? Okay here goes. Ferula!” The man screamed but his leg slowly went back into its original shape. Harry cast a few more wound closing spells and recast the diagnostic charm. He told the man about his ribs and that he didn’t want to risk doing anything about them right now. Madame Pomfrey always said that ‘Ribs are tricky things’. His second diagnostic spell indicated that it was only bruising with no breakage.

“Blimey! You weren’t kidding when you said that was gonna hurt! You said little Jay will be able to do all this one day?” Mr. Higgins grunted.

“Yes with a lot of studying and practice, but that’s what Ravenclaws are good at. Listen I would love to answer your questions. For now if your van will start you need to get out of here and I need to check on the other people. You seem okay, but tomorrow go see a doctor and get checked out, especially the ribs. Be careful driving. Jason, I need you to be a big helper to your dad. Keep an eye out for the dementors. Tell him if you see any so he can drive away from them. Make sure you carry your wand with you and start practicing stunners and full body binds, or at least the wand motions.”

“I’ll do it sir!” Harry cringed again.

“Thank you son.” Mr. Higgins turned the engine over and pulled away. Jason was waving madly to him. Harry turned around to check the other vehicle.

The people in the car had already been kissed. It sickened Harry to look at the infant still in a car seat. He hoped and prayed, but several shakes didn’t cause the child to wake, cry or even move. They were all still breathing. It would take several days for the body to just give up and die.

Harry was mad now. Closing his eyes he tried to sense more dementors. They had moved a couple of blocks away and were

beginning to regroup, unwilling to give up on their denied feast. Bill was asking Harry what he told the man and the two witches were scanning the sky for more signs of trouble. Harry ignored them. He summoned his firebolt. If he had been paying attention, he would have noticed that he used his non-wand hand to do so. In a single fluid motion he mounted the finely crafted broom and shot over the houses. Again he ignored their shouts. The image of the soulless baby etched on his brain. Three streets over he saw them hovering like the avatars of death they were. Harry stopped about ten meters in front of them and hovered on his racing broom. There were no thoughts of happiness on his mind only righteous anger that these things even exist. He leveled his wand at them. No incantation came from his lips, but he felt a surge in his magic. The air around him crackled. There was a visual sensation like that when the lights flicker during a brown out. Harry felt his entire wand arm jerk as his patronus shot out and hit the ground running. The clatter of Prong's hooves echoed off the asphalt. That wasn't right. Patroni don't make any noise. The group of shadows began to disburse, but one moved too slowly. It was impaled on the antlers of the avenging stag. The foul creature began to thrash wildly as wisps of smoke curled around the wounds. The other dementors stopped in midair and looked on at their wounded counterpart. It clawed frantically at Prongs and managed to push itself off of the antlers. The dementor collapsed to the street.

Prongs wasn't done with the dementor, by a long shot. The stag began to repeatedly trample it. The dingy black and gray smoke was pouring out of the dementor now. It stretched a bony hand up to its comrades like a desperate cry for help. The appendage fell uselessly to the road as Prongs reared and brought both front hooves down on its head. The body lay there momentarily and then disintegrated in a column of smoke, which billowed around the patronus. It stepped through the cloud and raised its head in challenge towards the dementors floating above. That act was all that was required to send the remaining dementors fleeing in all directions. Harry could feel their terror. It tasted good.

Harry noticed the others next to him staring wide-eyed. They had just witnessed the impossible. Harry didn't care. He didn't care how drained he felt or that it felt like his shoulder had been hit by a bludger.

Prongs walked back over to him as he dismounted and landed on unsteady legs. He looked bigger than usual and far more intimidating. Harry reached his hand out to touch it like he always does, knowing that it would pass through and the avatar of his father would disappear.

Instead he felt fur as he touched the snout, soft delicate fur. He ran his hand alongside the side of Prong's head and touched the antlers. They were as solid as the rest of him. He wrapped his arms around the neck and performed an act he never thought possible. It wasn't quite real, but somewhere between reality and the fantastic, however on that deserted street Harry Potter gave his father a hug. A minute later the stag began to fade from view.

Susan spoke after a moment, "Harry that was amazing! How did you do that?"

"I don't know. I just wanted them gone."

"Your patronus was solid! I have never heard of that before." Emmeline said.

"Bet the dementors have never heard of it either. I told you Harry was the next best thing." Bill said smiling. "How did you know where they were?"

"When I close my eyes and concentrate, I can sense them. Can't you?"

"Uh no. Not unless they are real close. You were a kilometer away and tracked them like a bloodhound."

All four pondered this in silence for a minute. This was interrupted by Bill spotting red sparks in the sky. "Come on! It's Dung! Harry mounted his broom and shot into the night. Susan lagging far behind. It took a minute to get there. The two order members were already fighting off the dementors. It was too late for Mundungus Fletcher. He had already been kissed. Harry dived off his broom. Whatever he could do it didn't require a fancy incantation or wand movement. He simply pointed his wand at the dementor, felt that same draining pulse of energy and said the only thing that came to mind.



“Die!”

----- (Scene Break – See my author’s notes on DLP for an explanation.)-----

“Lucius, Walden so good to see you. I trust you have been well.” Lord Voldemort greeted some of his freed minions. His forces firmly controlled two thirds of the prison. All the high security prisoners had been released. The ones who were not already his servants had been brought before him.

“I have a simple choice for you, join my service or I kill you. Not to be rude, but I am in a hurry. You have one minute to decide.”

The four men who had been sentenced for murder immediately opted for service. The woman was carefully regarding her decision. After twenty seconds she asked a question.

“Can I kill Fudge?” There was a gleam in her eyes.

“Ah Madame Faircloth, I suspect had you been my adversary at the ministry this would not have been so easy. I do not care what happens to the buffoon. Is that all you require?”

“Well, I will probably need to kill his wife and children in front of him, before he dies.”

“Understandable. You have a deal.”

“Thank you my lord.” Voldemort applied his mark to her knowing that several of his inner circle had assisted in her frame up, but her diminished faculties were fixated on the useless oaf Fudge. The witch was dangerous and broken. He could reassemble the pieces in his own design.

“Lucius reinforce Peter at the front line. Kill them make them bleed, but do not completely over run them. They will send more reinforcements. When those reinforcements arrive slaughter them. We have the advantage here and the fools won’t know it until it is too late. The rocks will run red with their blood. Walden find my servants outside and have the trolls and dragon commence destroying the

North towers. Antonin, take the rest and control the outside of the island. Voldemort watched his death eaters disburse. Two guards remained to cover the Merlin rally point.

--- (Last Scene Break)-----

“Dammit! We’re getting slaughtered here! Spinnet keep cursing. Tonks! Where are the goddamn reinforcements?”

“Moody’s bringing them!” Tonks shot back checking the Warden’s body. “Fulton’s gone!”

Tonks did a quick survey, counting her there were only six aurors left crouching behind the overturned oak tables. The situation looked grim. If she were in charge, she would order a retreat. It was after all just a rock in the middle of an ocean. She spun around a table and fired two quick reductors not even caring whether they had any effect. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a shimmer of movement. Acting on instinct she snapped off a cutter. She was rewarded with a scream from the disillusioned death eater. Dawlish’s bludgeoner slammed into him a moment later and the enemy fell.

Alastor Moody’s voice boomed through the hall, “Take up defensive positions and concentrate your firepower. Let’s push them back!” Tonks had never been happier to hear the clank of Moody’s artificial leg.

The death eater advance faltered in the face of the twenty new arrivals. Curses crossed the room in waves. It was pretty much a stalemate at this point. She was taking cover with Kingsley and Dawlish, one of them would shield the two firing curses. Moody came up behind them.

“Okay you three, there’s a secret passage that will take us to the main hall.” He said tapping his magic eye. “The house elves say that he’s there with only two of his lackeys. I talked a pair of them into popping into the room right when we come out for a distraction. We can get the drop on him and end this once and for all. Anders, you take command. You three follow me this way.”

## Chapter 11 – The Fall of Azkaban

Tonks followed Moody, Dawlish and Shacklebolt back outside the prison. They moved along the rocks away from the path towards the rally point. Moody stopped at a rock and tapped it three times with his wand, muttered something and tapped the rock again twice. The large rock slid aside revealing a small passageway.

“I was assistant warden here in late sixties. You pick up a few things. The house elves will be waiting for us at the end. We will come out in the west corner behind the row of benches. Everyone will disillusion themselves. Tonks, you and Dawlish circle left and take out his two bodyguards. Watch your clumsiness girl! Kingsley, you and I move up the benches and do some big game hunting. I will have the house elves wait thirty seconds and cause a diversion. Everyone clear? Good. Let’s finish this.”

The passageway was tight only wide enough for one person. Moments later the rock moved back into place plunging them into darkness. Moody lit his wand, but just barely. The quartet moved up along the narrow passage about fifty feet. Tonks began to feel a gnawing in the pit of her stomach. She never put much stock in divination, but this simply did not ‘feel’ right. Grimacing she pushed those feelings aside and chalked it up to pre-fight jitters. She started going over her mental inventory of spells. Cutters, she would start with cutters. A nice powerful severing charm would do nicely. Consciously, she flattened the muscles and made other body modifications that would cut down on her profile. One of the nice things about her power was the ability to adjust her profile to make her less of a target. It caused her to stumble slightly. She would need a minute to adjust to her reconfiguration, but she knew Moody still needed to talk to the elves and he would use his magic eye to scan the room. She started to think about Remus.

‘Shit! What am I thinking? The most powerful wizard in the world is on the other side of that wall and I am doing? Getting all girly over a fur ball!’ She thought shaking her head with disgust.

She watched as Moody knelt down and spoke with both the house elves. Dawlish had a thoughtful look on his face and Kingsley - well

he always had this stern too serious look on his face. So he looked like his usual self. Moody had more experience, but Kingsley was the superior fighter. In an even up match if Moody was in his prime and still had the rest of his body parts, she would take him. She had seen him duel before. It was more about strategy than power. Alastor Moody was a nasty piece of work in a fight. Though his raw power was nothing to sneeze at, he would conjure and transfigure like Dumbledore. Back him up with Kingsley's raw power and the Dark Lord will be in a spot of trouble. She went ahead and disillusioned her self, shivering as always at the slimy feeling of the disillusionment magic. She took a couple of quick steps back down the tunnel to readjust her senses. There was no room for error at this time.

Moody waited until all the others had disappeared, in a hushed whisper he said, "Alright! This is it! Kingsley you're out first, go when I tap you. Next is Dawlish, wait for my tap. I go after and Tonks you bring up the rear. Count to five after I tap and then follow. He's on the other side of the room. Death Eater number one is in the center of the room. Tonks he's all yours. Number two is looking down the hallway towards the dining area. Finish him quickly Dawlish. Don't waste time being pretty. We will need your help. Kingsley, roll out the heavy artillery. We both cut loose with our best stuff. After our first blast, I'll concentrate on shielding you, while you hit him with everything you've got! You two elves pop right out in the far corner of the room and scream bloody murder! Pop away as soon as the spells start flying." He cast a wide area silencing charm and activated the hidden door mechanism. He took a deep breath and tapped Kingsley on the shoulder.

---- (Scene Break) ----

Harry sagged to the ground. Conjuring his second solid patronus took a great deal out of him. The results were no less spectacular though. Prongs thundered across the grass and slammed into the dementor driving it away from the husk that had once been a wizard named Fletcher. It was confusing as to why he could do this. He doubted that this would be the 'Power the Dark Lord Knows Not', nor did it fit the pattern of his learn something new by experiencing that the Supreme Mugchump brought up. The other two dementors had fled and the two order members watched as his patronus savaged the dementor.

It again leaked the dingy smoke everywhere as it struggled to break free. It briefly succeeded and started to fly away. Prongs gave chase. The hell spawn flew for about twenty meters before nose-diving down into the ground. Prongs picked up even more speed and trampled the dementor. It disintegrated less than ten seconds later.

There was a moment of quiet as the foursome looked at the body of the fallen wizard. Finally Emmeline spoke. "We'll come back for his body later. Right now we probably need to move to the next town. You two ready to side along again?"

Bill looked at Harry very concerned, "Harry you don't look so hot. Why don't you lay off the killer patronus and just use a regular one if you can? It looks like it is draining you badly."

"He's right Harry." Susan said coming up next to him. "Don't push yourself too hard."

Harry wanted to protest, but he knew they were right. He felt like old Ollie 'the crazed maniac' Wood himself had just put him through an entire quidditch practice. "I'll try and take it easy."

"That's the answer I was looking for!" Susan said squeezing his hand and smiling at him. She went over to Bill as he partnered up with Emmy for the next apparition. He tried to concentrate on the way the magic felt while it was happening. Earlier, he had been too preoccupied with his own thoughts to think about memorizing what apparition feels like. He didn't really care for the sensation that much. It was memorable to say the least, for a moment you feel like you are suddenly compressed and you feel like there is no air to breath. Next thing you know there you are somewhere else, with hopefully all your body parts. There is usually a loud crack as the air is forced outward. A skilled wizard or witch can muffle the noise to where it is practically nonexistent. It is not recommended to apparate with silencing or disillusioning charms on yourself. The chances of a splinching increase dramatically if you are trying to move yourself and an external magical aura at the same time.

Harry felt himself squeeze back into existence in a grocery store parking lot. He got his footing and gasped for a breath. He saw Bill and Susan appear and with a note of satisfaction his girlfriend, who

made floo travel look effortless also stumbled about a bit. Taking a moment he got his bearings.

“Harry, can you sense them like you did last time?” Emmeline asked.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. It felt good to close his eyes. He took a moment to consider that this day had started off for him around two thirty in the morning and from the moment he realized Percy was dead, it had been one startling revelation after another. He was an adult now and though he hadn’t come out and asked Susan, he was engaged to be married. That should go over even better than his patronus lesson. A nice warm bath would be nice and sleep would be a welcome companion tonight.

“Uh Harry, still with us mate?” Bill asked.

“Oh, I err sorry, just drifted there for a minute. No, I don’t feel them anywhere around here. We had better move on.”

“Actually, why don’t we take five? Now that I can see you in this light, you look like you need a couple of minutes.” Bill stated.

“No. We should go on.” Harry said firmly.

“Not happening champ! I don’t want to pop into a fight and have you fall over. Why don’t you and Susan go sit on that bench over there? We’ll come get you in a few. Here let me take your brooms.” Bill said taking the Cleansweep first and then with a little grumbling protest Harry’s Firebolt. Emmeline and Bill watched as Susan led him over to the bench just outside the closed grocery store and sat with him.

“Those two huh? I always thought he had a thing for your kid sister?” Emmeline said playing with a strand of her long black hair.

“Apparently, everyone else had that idea. They just forgot to tell him. Merlin, look at this broom. Makes this other one look like some useless twig! Don’t spread this around Emmy, but he’s got a marriage clause hanging over him. As if he doesn’t already have enough to worry about.”

“So are we looking at the future Mr. and Mrs. Potter over there?”

“Could be. I’ve spent a good part of the day around them and they both seem like they’re leaning on each other really hard. It’s pretty easy to see how bad she’s got it. Harry on the other hand is a bit harder to read. I really think Ginny blew her chance with him.”

“I see what you mean. Hell if I were ten years younger, I’d probably take a shot at him. Did you feel his aura when you side-a longed with him? Holy mother of Circe! It felt like I was side-a longing with Dumbledore.”

“Yeah, I felt it too. There’s a whole lot of raw power in him, that’s for sure. Don’t laugh, but you and Tonks both got thrown in to the whole marriage clause thing.”

“You’re kidding me! Oh, you’re not kidding me. No wonder Dumbledore asked me what I thought of Harry! How long are you really going to let him rest?”

“Probably a half an hour. He’s dead on his feet. I guess doing something no one has done before takes a bit out of you. I bet all of us could use a bit of downtime.” Bill said with a bit of a chuckle.

Emmeline watched as Susan started stroking Harry’s hair. He had nuzzled his face into her lap and was probably already out. They looked good doing that. She recalled a time long gone when Bill and she used to snuggle like that. She figured since there was a little time to kill she may as well have a bit of fun.

“So Billy, tell me about that little French teenager you’re shagging.”

---- (Meanwhile on the bench) ----

“Sit.” Susan commanded pointing at the bench. Harry was still grumbling, but sat nonetheless. Once seated, he sighed heavily. Susan sat down next to him and put her arm around him.

After a few seconds Harry broke the silence, “Sorry. It’s not really much of a first date is it?”

It made her laugh, “Ever the gentleman, I suppose I should be more concerned the next time you want to take me out for a night on the

town. Just relax Harry. Take a moment and rest. You don't need to keep me company." Susan pulled him down to where his head was in her lap and started playing with his hair and massaging his scalp.

"Feels good. Thanks!" Harry mumbled.

"Hush now. Just be quiet and rest." She said pulling his glasses off his face and setting them next to her. After two minutes of her ministrations, she noticed his breathing pattern had changed. Taking a moment, she considered how exactly Harry had come to be in her lap. From the moment he arrived in her living room, he had been an unstoppable force and she found her life starting to revolve around him. She didn't need Hannah to point out to her how badly she had been crushing on him. Her emotions had been swirling mess these past couple of days. Oh she put on a brave face when she was outside her bedroom, but behind closed doors it all evaporated. She knew that she was the reason both Hannah and Chelsea agreed to come to the Number 12.

She thought back to her conversation on the way to the will reading. Hannah had been waiting for her, when she came downstairs.

"Are you okay?" She asked.

"You could say that." Susan replied trying to sound vague.

"Spill it!" Hannah ordered.

"Harry came up to see me."

"And?"

"We talked for a little while. Then he realized why the Leech was being a complete bitch."

"And?" Hannah's voice had a twinge of frustration to it.

"Then he kissed me." Susan said watching her friend's eyes go wide.

"Really!"



“Yes! Not so loud! We aren’t going to say anything until after the readings.”

“Oh okay.” Hannah sounded a bit disappointed. “So how was it?”

“Good, very good. Better than good in fact. Then we came back down from the attic...”

“Susan! Up there? Gross! That place stinks!”

“Yeah, I know. Anyway, then he came back over to my room after he showered and changed, I was having another of my crying episodes and he just started holding me and cheering me up. Then he said that it was his job as my boyfriend!” Both girls were jumping up and down at this point. She was so excited that she could ignore Ginny following him around like a puppy dog on the way to the will.

Susan had thought that would be the highlight of the day. Nothing could top that – right? Wrong! It wasn’t the fairy tale proposal she had dreamed of, but it had been so intense. She still marveled at how he had just been so casual about the two of them getting married! The whole thing seemed so surreal at the moment. Out of the clear blue he had suddenly said that she was his intended and then he made that whole little speech to her in his Aunt’s driveway. Susan knew she never stood a chance as soon as he started speaking. One minute they are kissing and the next he is crying out in pain and vomiting on his relative’s vehicle. Their relationship seemed to involve an inordinate amount of vomiting so far. ‘Not exactly a great foundation.’ She thought. Still, she managed to get him back through the floo and clean him up. Then there was that whole thing with her making a patronus. ‘That’s one way to announce that we are a couple!’ At first she was nervous and insecure, but then after a second or two the whole room faded away and it was just the two of them. She didn’t even open her eyes when she cast the spell. There might have been a few areas of her body that were not covered by gooseflesh at that particular moment. She was not entirely sure though.

She wondered what Hannah would say when she told her. Her gut feeling was that Hannah wouldn’t be as happy about this. She could hear her friend already – telling her that they’re moving too fast and to be careful around Harry. Wow! There’s a concept! Be careful around

Harry Potter! Careful like running out into the middle of the night looking for dementors? That kind of careful? She sighed knowing that Hannah cared more for Susan than Susan's relationship with Harry. It cheered her to know that she had such a good and reliable friend and she would need Hannah to keep her from getting too carried away. There was the irony. He was sweeping her off her feet without even trying. All the while saying he liked her, but wasn't even sure if he could love her. She should be angry, but looking at his sleeping face, she couldn't even muster annoyance, let alone anger.

Quietly she whispered with her trademark smile on her face, "Oh Harry, what am I ever going to do with you?"

----- (Scene Break) ----

The central chamber of Azkaban's prison was a large room. In the front of the room was a raised platform with a podium in the center and an ominous looking statue of a dementor. It was here that the prisoners gathered to watch the kiss administered. Rows of uncomfortable benches some with iron rings bolted into the stone floor to shackle the unwilling audience.

Voldemort stood in the corner of the main chamber, Peter was due back in about five minutes from the front. The bulk of the ministries reinforcements should be on hand now and the slaughter should begin. He already heard the sounds of the demolition crew beginning on the High Security Ward. Perhaps when he was victorious, he would have a monument built here to commemorate this day. By tomorrow the all of Wizarding Britain would be in complete chaos. It was interesting to consider how things would proceed from here. There was a risk here that the destruction of this prison might actually cause the masses to grow a backbone, but he doubted it sincerely. He suspected that some of his followers were chafing at his offensive aimed at pureblood families. They were blinded by their hatred of all things muggleborn. In this instance, it made no sense to kill the muggleborn witches and wizards. The reality is that they don't possess the power base. The prominent purebloods do. The Wizengamot couldn't care less about some teenaged muggle witch and her parents. They care about themselves. Otherwise, he may as well start with all the records of magical births in Britain and begin a

systematic slaughter. 'No real use if there is no one left to rule now is it?' Still, he knew that he would have to order a series of attacks against muggleborns just to placate his troops. He would need to plan his strikes carefully, to maximize their effectiveness. Muggleborns close to Potter like that Granger girl. She has a bit of fame in her own right. Dual-purpose killings had a nice ring to them. Peter would undoubtedly have some ridiculous term for it.

He was lost in thought standing there. It took him a moment to notice the figures sneaking around the room. One of the first lessons he learned from the Oh-So-Great Dumbledore, was the ability to see invisible objects. It was one of the first skills he acquired and here are these four foolish aurors intending to sneak up on the big bad Dark Lord. Good lord! If such a thing existed it would practically be on the 'Dark Lord Entrance Exams'. Not knowing whether to be insulted, he tried to casually observe them without showing his advantage.

'Let us see, the great and venerable Moody himself. Time to finish what you started, my dear Misha. Oh and he brought his protégé, Shackbolt. They're coming after me. There's Fudge's bodyguard who's dangerous only because he is at the rock bottom with nowhere else to go and what a delight, is that Bella's niece the metamorphagus? I haven't seen one of those since that hit wizard in Calcutta. Now, that was a memorable fight! Should I warn my minions? I suppose I should, no sense in wasting resources.'

"Cooper, Jamison; go reinforce Lucius at the front line! There is no immediate threat here. Go now." Voldemort said watching the two death eaters run down the hallway.

He waited five seconds, fondling his yew wand in his hands a wicked smile played across his lips. "Well, are the four of you just going to stand there or are we going to do this?" He enjoyed the shocked looks on their faces.

Wasting no time he animated the statue next to the metamorphagus, which grabbed her, while wandlessly tossing a bench into the path of the moor's blasting curse. Dawlish's cutter went wide left while Moody had fired a second blaster that had finished pulverizing the rest of the stone bench. Voldemort hissed as he raised a reflecting shield

sending the second cutter from Dawlish into the cloud of stone debris making Moody dive out of the way. A *Perfigo* from Shackbolt hit his vest and the unicorn hide made it feel like nothing more than a love tap, well more like one of Bella's love taps.

'Fudge's pet seems fond of cutters. Let's see him handle this!' He whipped the bone saw, crushing through the shields of the burly auror, severing both of his legs just above the kneecaps. Voldemort ignored the two screaming house elves that had appeared in the room.

'Two down. Two to go. Time to really enjoy myself.' He felt his blood pumping; it wasn't just Weasley's magical core making him feel young right now. A wave of his wand and three wolves appeared. Moody transfigured two benches into giant scorpions, while Shackbolt summoned a small black bear. He had to appreciate Moody's tactics; fill the battlefield with clutter and take pot shots. He would have made a fine death eater. Sparing a glance at his fallen opponents he noticed that Dawlish was missing and one of the house elves was trying to free the girl. With a gesture he banished the creature into the wall so hard that it was probably dead.

'Should have killed the house elves the instant they appeared.' He scolded himself. He would remind his forces to kill all the house elves on this island for this affront. He fired a spread of blasters that killed the scorpions allowing his two remaining wolves to attack the bear.

'Time for some good old fashioned taunting.' He thought before continuing aloud. "Nothing like a good brawl to get the blood flowing! Here let me help get your blood flowing!"

He fired an 'Impaler' at the auror, who screamed as it hit his protective vest. It probably didn't do too much damage, but it was enough to stagger the auror making the man's return fire easy to dodge. Moody's bludgeoner required a strong shield and even then, he was still felt the shockwave reverberate through him. Voldemort sent a killing curse towards Shackbolt only to have Moody summon his partner out of the way of the fatal curse. To the auror's credit, he must have been expecting Moody to do that as he managed to fire a pair of accurate piercing curses as he was dragged out of harms way.

Lord Voldemort shielded himself from the curses not wanting to test the limits of his protective equipment. The first one was blocked, but the second gouged his arm rather painfully ripping a hole in his sleeves and opening a bloody wound on both sides of his upper arm. The last wolf staggered over the bear's corpse, but fell to yet another piercing curse from Shacklebolt. Moments later the conjured animals disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Using the cloud as cover, Voldemort circled to his left firing a specialized strangulation and cutting curse known as "The Ripper", named for Lucius's great grandfather, a spell crafter by trade who went on a muggle killing spree in the late 1800's. The most amazing thing about Jacques Malfoy's actions was that he managed to keep himself out of this very prison. When captured by magical law enforcement at the time, he simply produced the research and development permits the Wizengamot had awarded him. The wording had been carefully crafted and expressly permitted testing of new spells on non-magical entities. The permits were revoked of course, but there was little else the ineffective body could do to the clever wizard. Pity the man's life was cut short in the early days of Grindlewald's first attempt at domination.

The obscure curse further injured the auror, but fell short of its intended goal of killing the man. Maneuvering to put the staggering man between himself and Moody, Voldemort fired an overpowered bludgeoning curse tossing Kingsley Shacklebolt through the air like a rag doll and crashing into the undamaged benches near the raised platform. Moody was forced to dodge out of the way to avoid being hit.

"Moody, how do you like your dark meat? I prefer mine well done!" With that Voldemort used a hellfire curse on the badly injured auror. Shacklebolt screamed while Moody tried to douse him with water spell. It was no use. Senior Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt died seconds later. Retired Senior Auror Alastor Moody spun back to face the Dark Lord, his face had a crazed expression coming from both eyes now. The smell of burnt flesh flooded the room.

"*Crucio!*" Moody screamed. Voldemort barely dodged in time. He did feel the raw power of the spell as it passed him though and was impressed. He felt the tingling sensation in his arm.

“Oh dear, Unforgiveables! You need to be careful Moody. You might end up, well here!” Voldemort laughed. He saw that Moody had completely lost his composure. The battle was essentially over, a forgone conclusion. Moody continued hurling spells - all of them lethal. Voldemort conjured a serpent in the path of a killing curse. He shielded himself from bludgeoners and cutters and dodged a few that looked a bit too dangerous. It was a rare chance for him to really concentrate on his defensive magic. He continued to taunt the deranged auror gleefully. It wasn't quite Bellatrix, but it wasn't half bad.

“So close Alastor! I could almost feel that one! You're getting sloppy with your wand work there. What do you think of your ambush now?”

Moody's face was a mask of hatred, burning bright red. He fired spell after spell only to see them blocked, dodged or otherwise rendered ineffective. He staggered forward over chunks of broken stonework, tripping on the iron ring bolted into the ground. Moody was preparing for another round of spells when he faltered and clutched his chest. His wand fell uselessly from his hand as he sagged to the ground.

Voldemort banished Moody's wand away from the hyperventilating auror. He cast a wound closing charm on his arm to repair the damage that Shackbolt had caused. “My, my having a bit of problems with the old ticker? Are all those years paranoia finally catching up to you? Not enough magic left in the old body to compensate for your wear and tear? You should have tried cleaner living. It's worked for me. Well that and dark rituals, but I digress.”

Moody looked up at him foaming slightly at the mouth, mouthing curses at him.

“I'm sorry, but I couldn't make that out Alastor. Please do me a favor and say hello to Misha for me. Don't worry I will be sending you lots of company soon.”

Looking down he picked up a piece of a wrought iron torch holder. A wave of his wand and it became a fairly nice imitation of a Roman short sword called a glaive.

"I grant you a gladiator's death Alastor Moody." He said as he drove the blade into the dying man's chest. A flick of his wand summoned the fallen auror's magical eye to his hand. A handy trinket laden with charms like this shouldn't be buried in the rubble. He wondered how badly injured Walden McNair's eye is, it would make a nice gift. It wasn't exactly a gold pocket watch for years of devoted service, but then again 'Mad Eye McNair' has a catchy ring to it.

Voldemort turned and walked towards the raised platform to where his prisoner struggled helplessly against the statue of the dementor. Walking up the steps he stopped to pick up the metamorphagus's wand. Bruises and cuts lined her arms from where she had struggled to free herself.

"What a glorious duel! You had a front row seat for it no less! Was that not spectacular? It was surely a sight to behold!" He said tossing the magical eye from one hand to the other in front of her.

"You bastard!"

"Well technically, you are correct. I suppose. Should I send for Bella? We could have a bit of a reunion."

Tonks was screaming incoherent vulgarities at him. He found it amusing to a point. A gesture with his wand silenced her.

"Such language my dear sweet girl. You have the mouth of a sailor." He said laughing as he stepped directly in front of her. She soundlessly screamed at him and slashed her arm with nails that had grown into claws on her elongated forearm. Lord Voldemort managed to leap aside but was still sporting a gash across his legs. A bit slower and he might have become a eunuch. He winced in pain and immediately treated her to a moment of agony under *Crucio*. He released her after five long seconds. Tending his wounded thigh, he looked at her.

"Well for that alone I should kill you, but I do need you to crawl back to the old man and the boy and show them what I have done. They need to see that they have no hope against me. I am weakened no more! Pity, I could use a talented young witch like you in my legions. Though I doubt you would work willingly and the amount of control

you have over your ability would allow you to quickly break free of the Imperius curse. Nonetheless, I do believe you should be punished. *Imperio!* Now my dear, assume your Aunt Bellatrix's form, but please stay your young and nubile self. Ah yes, she was a majestic beauty back then."

He released her from the statue and mentally commanded her to crawl to him. He forced her to lick the blood of Alastor Moody off of his boots. Pulling her up, he glared down at her and smiled.

"Now my dear. Look into your master's eyes. I am going to cast a spell just for people with your unique talents. It will lock you into your present form for a long, long time. Every time you look in the mirror you will know my power. I do hope no one simply kills you on sight. You do need to show the fools that they have no chance at all. You need to tell them that I am coming for them. You need to tell them to enjoy the precious few days they have left! First, we should have a bit of fun shall we? On your knees bitch!"

He thought to himself, 'It is good to feel young again.'

--- (Scene Break)---

"Harry? Harry? Wake up sleepy head! Bill and Ms. Vance are signaling that its time to go. Come on green eyes." Susan said teasing.

"Mrumph?" Harry replied not really coherent.

"You're not really at your best just waking up are you?"

"Uh, I'm awake."

"Almost, I think."

"How long was I out?"

"About a half an hour. Looked like you could have slept all night. Much as I like having you in my lap like this, I suppose we should get up."



“Glasses?”

“Oh here you go.”

“Thanks. Though you were a pretty blur?” Harry said making her smile and blush a bit.

“Why Mr. Potter aren’t you just a little flirt?” She said pushing him upright.

“Just following Fred and George’s advice.” He said standing up and offering his hand to her. She stumbled a bit because of her legs being slightly asleep.

“What advice did they give you?” She asked showing mock fright.

“Tell a girl she is pretty when she least expects it. It confuses them. What can’t believe you are dating someone who takes dating advice from Fred and George Weasley.”

Susan looked thoughtful for a second as they started towards Bill and Emmeline. “No. Last I checked, I am marrying a guy who takes advice from Fred and George Weasley.”

“Kind of skipped that whole dating part didn’t we?” Harry said uncertain of how to proceed.

Susan was suddenly terrified. “You’re not having second thoughts are you?”

“No. It’s just, I don’t know. It’s just not the way I imagined it.” He said sheepishly.

Susan felt the anger she couldn’t find awhile ago suddenly present. “And you think it’s the way I planned it?”

“Susan, stop. Let’s not get into an argument. We’re making the best of a bad situation.”

“Is that all I am a ‘bad situation’?” She was getting quite loud.

He tried to grab a hold of her hand and she brushed it away roughly. He shook his head at her aware that Bill and Emmeline were now listening intently. "What do you want from me, Susan? What you see is what you get. I meant every word I said to you. I don't have anything else to offer. I won't lie to you and say I am in love with you. When I say it, I want to mean it! You deserve more than that!"

Susan started to say something, but he just started walking. She stood there open mouthed not knowing what to say. He held his hand out to Bill for his broom. After retrieving it, he went stand next to Emmeline.

Looking anywhere but at Susan, he whispered, "C'mon lets go already."

Susan was heading over to Bill as the others apparated away. Bill held on to her broom for a second.

"You shouldn't push him like that. Keep it up and you'll drive him right into my sister's arms."

"You'd like that wouldn't you?" She accused.

"It's not about me. It's about Harry."

"What about him?"

"I watched the two of you over there. I've never seen him drop his guard before and let someone hold him like that. Watch when my mother tries to hug him or anyone else and he looks like a trapped animal. I asked Ron too. He said that he's like that all the time, but he is trying for you. Don't back him into a corner. Don't pressure him for more than he can give or you will lose him."

"You're right. I shouldn't have. I was just ..."

"You were just projecting your own insecurities. You're young it happens. Hell, take it from me it still happens later in life too." Bill said handing Susan her broom and reaching for her hand. "We'd better go. They might start worrying."

As Harry reappeared in the next town, he stepped away from Emmeline and closed his eyes to concentrate. He felt them. Two separate groups. One was to the East and the other due North. It seemed to be easier to focus when he was angry. Why did she have to be like that?

"Don't beat yourself up. She's scared. I was a teenaged witch once too, so I should know." Emmeline said scanning the clouds. "Anything?"

"Two groups. One is that way. The other one is this way. I'll go ahead. You bring the others." He said mounting his broom.

"No wait for Bill and Susan. Don't go...." It was too late already.

Harry kicked off hard and brought the firebolt up to speed. He didn't remember for thirty seconds to recast the *Notice Me Not* glamour on himself. He was approaching a downtown city block. It looked like the cinema had let out the late show into a group of hungry dementors. Harry could hear their screams. Flying faster he concentrated on just casting a regular patronus. He landed and dismounted his broom. Pointing at the dementors he sent his patronus out. He was relieved that it was just the regular one. Maybe his anger was holding him back, or maybe he could control it. He watched as Prongs scattered the dementors. He looked over at the man kneeling on top of a woman. A quick look about and there were three others checking people.

"It's too late she's gone." Harry said as the man looked up at him, frothy blood coming from his mouth. He started lunging towards Harry.

'Shit Vampires!' Harry thought.

--- (Scene Break) ---

Rufus Scrimgeour appeared in his office. He was one of the few that were keyed into the wards and authorized apparating rights into Auror Headquarters. He had not moved his items into Amelia's office at the Ministry yet. If he played his cards right, he might have an even larger office waiting for him. He had just gotten off the floo with Amos Diggory and immediately went to his office. Opening the door, he

looked out into a somewhat empty room. He had hoped that Anders or Tompkins would be here to brief him, but all he saw was a couple of junior aurors and the 'floo kiddies'. He looked at one of the female aurors, because he actually could match her face to her name.

"Sanders, what is the status?"

She responded with a trapped animal look. "I don't know sir. I only just got here."

One of the female 'floo kiddies' looked at him and held a clipboard. "Director, I have the current status. At nine twenty-five this evening, we received two alarms from Azkaban. The rapid response team was immediately dispatched and we began using the alert bill to call all available agents. At nine thirty-seven, we received a report that a major assault was underway at the prison. Only one of the rally points was usable and there was confirmation of three trolls and one dragon. The auror reported that the prisoners in the high security ward had been freed and armed. There were unconfirmed reports that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is there. Auror Moody led all available resources to the departure pad. He left with approximately twenty aurors at nine forty-five. There have been no reports from Azkaban since then. Since their departure, eight additional aurors have arrived. I asked the first three to wait by the arrival pad in case of injuries. The next three are waiting at the departure pad for further instruction. I recommended that they wait until there are at least ten on hand. At nine fifty-seven, we began receiving reports that the dementors were attacking the coastal towns near the prison. At that time I had my grade one's contact both the Ministry and St. Mungo's to make them aware of the situation."

He was impressed by the professionalism of the teenager and the manner in which she reported them as she handed him the dispatcher's clipboard. "What are we doing about the dementors?"

The girl looked hesitant for a moment, "Well without any available personnel, I called my cousin."

His eyes narrowed, "and your cousin is?"

“Emmeline Vance, she sort of works for Professor Dumbledore.” Lavender said slowly.

“Oh, one of his people. Yes, I know about his group as well. What did she say?”

“She said she would get what people she could and get out there.”

“If they can make a difference good for them. We have bigger problems at the moment. Contact the prison and get me a status. No one else goes there until we know what is going on. You two get down to the arrival and departure pads. Get a statement for anyone that comes back and get it up to me. I will be in my office on the floo with the Ministry.”

He watched the aurors head down to the staging areas for a moment and turned back to the senior ‘floo kiddie’. “You are in charge out here. Send any further arrivals down to the staging areas. If the media gets wind of this, you are to refer them to the Ministry floo switchboard. If you get any contact from Dumbledore or his people, keep them on the floo and come and get me. I will need one of your people to be a runner.”

Lavendar pointed to Eddie and said, “Go with the Director, Eddie.” She turned back to her ‘people’ and told them to get back to work.

Rufus headed back to his office trailed by the intern. He told the boy to wait outside and he would call when needed. Once inside the office he started his fire and contacted Amos Diggory. It took several minutes to update him on the situation. He left out the part about Dumbledore’s people, saying only that a small private group of wizards and witches were investigating. He recommended that Director Diggory draft a press release that an attack at Azkaban was underway and that the coastal areas near the prison should be on guard. Rufus warned his counterpart to be careful not to start a panic with the statement.

Afterwards, he sat back in his large leather chair and summoned his old protective vest from the closet. He had been eager at Fudge’s downfall and the possibilities ahead. Amelia’s death hit him hard though. He had figured Madame Bones was a shoo in for Minister

and he would be elevated into Director of Magical Law Enforcement. Now there was the distinct possibility that he could end up as Minister of Magic. The question was did he want it? His conclusion was that if he was going to fight a war, he may as well be in charge of this war, rather than have to follow the directives from above. With luck, he would move Shacklebolt into Chief of Aurors and though it was tempting to offer DMLE to Moody, the man was borderline insane. Lars Anders or Ada Dawson would be a much better choice. He called for the boy and told him to contact the Mrs. Dawson, the day shift watch captain and have her report to his office immediately. He also instructed the boy to get a head count on the aurors in the building.

Five minutes passed before his door opened. It wasn't the boy, but one of his aurors helping a second wounded auror into the room. The wounded auror's protective vest was tattered and frayed. He had curse burns on his left arm and left leg.

"Director, we brought Spinnet up for a report. The rest we sent on to St. Mungo's."

"How many came back with you son?"

The young man looked up with haunted eyes. "Only seven of us came back sir. The prison has fallen!"

Rufus listened in disbelief. Sixteen aurors on duty at the prison, six from the rapid response team and twenty plus who went to reinforce and only seven came back! The wounded auror was from the rapid response team. He reported everything he saw from the time he got there. The reinforcements held their ground until a dragon smashed into the dining area. Anders had ordered 'Sauvé Qui Peut', but died on the retreat to rally point Circe. Spinnet said he ordered the aurors at the arrival pad to erect bars around the arrival pad in case death eaters or prison escapees tried to follow. The other auror said the rest had taken up crossfire positions around the pad until the cursebreakers could disconnect Azkaban accessing the Headquarters.

He looked for his runner and ordered the boy to get in contact with the senior goblins at Gringotts and get a priority team of

cursebreakers here to modify the wards. Also the floo operators needed to contact the day shift workers at the prison and have them report here immediately. Rufus watched as the boy ran like a dementor was behind him. He dismissed the two aurors and instructed Spinnet to get patched up at St. Mungo's and get back here as soon as possible. He turned back to the fireplace; the loss of nearly one third of his aurors weighing heavily on his mind. This was a new tactic from the Dark Lord. He was either going to capture the prison or raze it. Neither one was a good sign for the Ministry. Sighing, he tossed some powder into the flames to inform the Ministry that one way or another the prison was a lost cause.

--- (Scene Break) ---

Voldemort played with his 'toy' for about fifteen minutes. He did not even stop his activities while Peter delivered his report. He enjoyed the confused look on Peter's face, before explaining that it was Bella's niece rather than the 'Lady of Pain' as she was also known. Peter's report was most pleasing. A paltry handful of aurors escaped and casualties among his forces were within planned estimates. A most successful day indeed! He instructed a passing dementor to begin rounding up the remaining prisoners.

He finished with the subjugated witch and left her lying half naked on the platform. Voldemort had finished making himself presentable and watched as his forces filed back into the central chamber. Lucius bowed before him and reported that he had left Rookwood and six others to watch the staging area. Bellatrix was keenly interested in her naked doppelganger, especially after he explained that it was her niece. It somewhat shocked Voldemort that Bella looked like she was actually interested in literally having a go with herself.

'Self love is a wonderful thing! Merlin, she is one crazy bitch!' He mused.

"By all means my dear. Place your own Imperius on her. I am done with her. My only instructions are that she survive and retain her memories. I need her to carry the tale of my complete victory to the old fool she serves. Beyond that you may indulge yourself. Take her down by the rocks. I have bound her abilities so do not be surprised if

she can't perform for you. When you are finished use a sticking charm and leave her stuck to the rocks with a view of the final destruction of Azkaban."

"You are so generous my lord. Your will is mine." Bella bowed deeply before leading her niece outside. The males were clearly ogling the metamorph. Some of his inner circle were gathered around the corpse of Alastor Moody. They were smiling and laughing. Voldemort knew that outside of Bella, Antonin and maybe Lucius that the dead auror was more than a match for any of them. The new recruits were basically pathetic. He would need to get them more experience, the sooner the better. He instructed Peter to lead the newer death eaters around the castle and kill any house elf they find.

Voldemort watched as the dementors led the prisoners from the medium security ward into the central chambers. He could almost smell their fear. Some of them would have to die to prove a point, but they should swell his number by easily thirty-five. He had a good idea of the person he would need to kill first.

"Greetings to all of you. Now which of you happens to be Sturgis Podmore?"

--- (Shift POV Sturgis Podmore) ---

He was two weeks away from release. Just two more weeks and he would be out of here. When the alarms began to sound he put his book down and tried to look out his door first and then out the window. He realized that there was trouble when a woman on a broom came flying by and a curse smashed into the wall. He could hear people screaming already.

For the next forty-five minutes, he craned his neck and tried to see and hear anything that he could. The rumblings in the floor, told him that this was no ordinary attack. One of the prisoners with a better view shouted that there was a dragon destroying the lifer side! This was bad, really bad. He would have to chance an escape. Dumbledore would understand. Merlin! He still saw the old man's face saying that he had called in favors and that Sturgis would only have to spend six months in Azkaban. Maybe six months wasn't a long time to Albus Dumbledore, but it felt like a real long time to him!



No, he couldn't be bothered to explain why Sturgis had been in the Department of Mysteries. If he ever caught up to Lucius Malfoy, he would make that bastard pay for putting him under the Imperius curse.

Fortunately, Warden Fulton had been a classmate at Hogwarts. He had for the most part kept the dementors away from Sturgis. He was even kind enough to stop forcing the restrictor potion on him each night. One of the downsides to being a registered animage was that they knew to prevent him from making his change. Not that his animagus form was really all that impressive, but who doesn't love a hamster. Hell, he used to entertain his little boys by doing the little plastic habitrail they got him for Christmas in 1985. The treadmill was actually good exercise. Jeff Fulton stopped by and let him know that he wouldn't feed his old friend that crap anymore. They chatted nightly when he was supposed to be giving him his restrictor potion and after a while he would dump it out.

When the dementor opened the door and gestured for him to leave, he could feel the terrifying aura emanating from the creature. He could hear the shouts of others. Getting by the monster in front of him, he saw no aurors in the hall.

'Oh hell, I don't think the aurors are in charge anymore.' He thought.

As soon as Sturgis found an opening where he didn't think he would be trampled, he shifted into his little brown hamster body and scurried down the corridor. Rounding the corner he caught his first glimpse of a death eater.

'Definitely not good.' He thought as he darted past out towards the ocean air.

--- (Last Scene Break) ---

His name was Coedus. It was not the name he had been born with, rather the name he had been reborn with. It was like a long lost dream to remember what life had been like for Darius Longbottom, oh so talented auror and dark creature eliminator extraordinaire. His classmate Albus took the honors in Charms and Transfiguration, but he had ruled Defense Against the Dark Arts. The aurors were practically begging him to join. He had not disappointed them until the

night he arrogantly tried to wipe out a group of Vampire's single handedly. It proved to be his undoing. When next his eyes opened blood no longer flowed through his veins. His ability to wield magic diminished to nearly that of a squib. Vampires could only use wandless magic. The ability to use a wand or other magical focus gone, like grains of sand through clenched fingers. It was the tradeoff for minor increases in strength speed and the dual animage form of wolf and bat.

When he tried to make contact with his wife, children and family, they renounced him. Albus pitied him and offered a few token gestures of help. Mostly, he learned the new lessons that all the newly undead learn. The living both fear and despise you. He had a meager existence for the next few decades. He found a new family amongst the small clans of Vampires in Britain. It was more an association of mutual defense and need for some companionship in a world that would rather them just be dead and gone. He became Coedus as Darius Longbottom disappeared into forgotten history.

The Vampire clans of Britain sought something better for themselves and collectively threw their lot in with Grindewald. His former colleagues, the aurors of Britain hunted them into extinction and what few remained sought sanctuary from their cousins on the continent. He hadn't been back to the land where he last walked among the living since Grindewald used the Imperius curse on that Serbian wizard named Princip. In truth, Grindewald was not overwhelming in power. If Coedus had still possessed Darius's powers, he may have very well been a match for the wizard. He was, however, a master manipulator who wielded his charisma like an unforgivable curse.

He watched with some interest as his former classmate and his new liege treated Europe like a giant chess board. Their manipulations and Byzantine schemes unfolded in dramatic fashion. Often, the line between who was exactly the Dark Lord seemed a bit blurred in Coedus's opinion. Eventually, Albus prevailed and reaped the rewards and adoration of Wizarding Europe. It was moments like that where he cursed his existence knowing full well that it may have been his feet the Wizarding World prostrated itself before.

Instead he watched from his forest hideouts and bolt holes, living off what fortune the cruel and uncaring world had to offer. The years went by. Whispers of new Dark Lords would pass through the infrequent channels of communication. It was not until the one who called himself Voldemort surfaced that the Vampire clans of Europe took note. They were prepared to join him when he conquered Britain. Unfortunately, he met his end before he could meet their requirements. At least that was what the clans thought for over a decade.

Now there was word of his return and so it was that Coedus found himself back in England again for the first time since 1914. He was there as an 'advisor'. His role to determine if Voldemort truly has the power to back his claims. Tonight, the Dark Lord would turn the dementors of Azkaban to his side and destroy the prison Coedus once worked at. Crossing the open water was painful for his kind, so he and three other kinsmen waited here along the coast to watch the results of his control over the dementors. The fact they were going to get a free meal was an added bonus.

Thus the small group of 'military observers' found themselves dining on the bodies of the soulless outside a muggle theater. The food was adequate. There was a running joke among his kind that English blood was like English cuisine – it will fill you up, but not really impress you. The girl he currently was dining on had a wonderfully fragrant smell to her. Too bad she would never be able to tell him what perfume she wore.

"Its too late, she's gone."

Coedus looked up and saw a young wizard. In the boy's eyes, he saw the same arrogant expression that Darius Longbottom once wore. There were four of his kind and only one little boy. He would show this boy pain before he killed the little wizard. Maybe he would turn him as well to teach the whelp the price of his arrogance. The same lesson he learned over a hundred years ago, besides magical blood has such a wonderful taste to it.

## Chapter 12 – Of Wicked Witches and Unforgivables

Sturgis darted in and out of the rocks, being a hamster in the dead of night was very good cover. Hamsters are not particularly fast creatures, but he was making good progress. Azkaban had definitely seen better days. Most of the high security wing has already been leveled. He saw some trolls and a dragon waiting to start in on the ward he had just left. He wasn't sure what to do? Getting back to the Order of the Phoenix would be a good start. They would be able to shelter him. He saw some brooms racing overhead.

'Best to stay in my animagus form for now.'

He just kept moving amongst the rocks. He saw two women moving out. He decided to move closer. Both of them looked like Bellatrix Lestrangle. One of them was pointing her wand at the other.

"Well my dear Nymphadora, now that I have you at my command what shall I do with you? You did like the taste of my master, did you not? How about we have some fun of our own? Would you like that my little slave? Put your wand down and strip. I'll find something to transfigure into a whip and then we will have a good old time."

'Holy shit! That's Tonks!'

Sturgis moved closer. He tried not to watch as Tonks dropped her tattered robes. She had a backup wand in an ankle holster, which was the only thing she had on at the moment. She removed the holster and set it on her clothes. From his hamster perspective it looked huge. He had two options. The first was to grab Tonk's wand and hope that she didn't have an anti-theft charm on it. The second was a more direct approach. In his human form, he easily outweighed Bellatrix Lestrangle by forty or fifty kilo. She is probably the most dangerous female in all of Britain, but like most purebloods Sturgis suspected that she would be ill prepared for hand to hand combat. In a duel Sturgis was sure Lestrangle would annihilate him.

Bellatrix returned with a piece of driftwood that she transfigured into a cat-o-nine tails. The hamster waited for her to put her wand back in robes. As much as he hated it, Sturgis realized he would have his best chance if he let Bellatrix whip Tonks once or twice and come up

behind her as she strikes. He hid behind a small rock and watched the cackling bitch pass by. Bellatrix was giggling and dancing like a child in a candy store. She commanded Tonks place her hands on a large rock and spread her legs like some criminal on those muggle shows. Bella gleefully brought the whip down on her niece's back.

"Scream you bitch! You know you love it, you whore! I beat you back in the ministry and I will beat you now!"

Sturgis crept up behind her and triggered his transformation. His left hand grabbed her right wrist and spun her around. He saw the glazed over look in her eyes turn to wide-eyed shock as he smashed his fist into her jaw with a resounding crack. She dropped immediately. He grabbed her wand from her limp form and cast a *finite incantemum* on the screaming auror. After five seconds the screaming stopped and she started crying.

"Tonks. We have to get out of here."

Tonks could hear him, but she didn't care as the fog lifted from her mind. Mentally, she retreated back into her preteen days. She remembered all the times when her dad would take her to the workshop on the edge of the property that he had wired for electricity. They would sit on a couch and her father would put a video in the VCR and eat a bucket of popcorn soaked in butter. Her favorite video of all time was the Wizard of Oz. Her shape changing abilities were already surfacing and by the end of the movie she would look like an eight-year-old Judy Garland.

Even to this day when her birthday came around, she would find time in her busy schedule to get over to her parents and watch videos with her dad. Last year, she joked with her mum and dad that she had her merry group of followers. She of course was Dorothy. There was some disagreement whether Kingsley was the Tin Man or Mad Eye (by virtue of his leg); with the other being the scarecrow and Remus was her cowardly lion. She didn't tell them about her uncle's animage abilities, but she hinted that she even had her little black doggie.

Now, with the exception of Remus, they were all gone. She sobbed for a minute and spun around her face twisted into a mask of hatred that even the woman she resembled would be proud of. She grabbed

her wand and threw her robes on. She cast a body bind on her aunt followed by an *Enervate*.

"I'm sorry, Auntie. I wasn't able to greet you properly. Now I can though. So how have you been? I haven't seen you since you killed Sirius. Did that even bother you? Did you lose any sleep over it, you insane bitch? Do you even care? Did your master reward you?"

Tonks stopped her rant as she regarded the cold eyes of her aunt. The body bind prevented any movement or talking from the death eater other than her eyes. Even if she were capable of speech, it was unlikely that Bellatrix had any remorse for her actions. Bellatrix was busy pooling her magic to try and burst free of the body bind. As with most spells, if a wizard or witch can concentrate and focus their magic they can attempt to overcome whatever charm, hex, jinx or curse that they are currently bewitched with. Tonks sensed this and cast a quick *Incarcerous* spell to further bind her in a conjuration that could not be broken in such a manner. She followed it with a cone of silence as Bellatrix overcame the body bind. The spell prevented sounds from exiting the cone, thus ensuring their privacy.

"Now, now dear Auntie, I can't have you calling for help. Can I?"

"What do you plan to do little girl? My lord will make you beg for death. Perhaps you will beg for something else?" Bellatrix watched the younger version of her face twist in anger and turn various shades of color. It was perversely amusing to study your own face in anger.

"Aw, did I make you mad? Are you upset at your wittle aunty?" Bella mocked in her baby voice.

Tonks was so angry that she was having trouble holding her wand. She barely noticed Sturgis whispering to her that they need to leave. If Moody or Kingsley were here, they would tell her to stun Bellatrix Lestrange and bring her in for questioning to see how much information could be gathered from her. Her position as one of the Dark Lord's inner circle meant she had a great deal of knowledge. She thought about how Bellatrix would be taken into custody and placed in a prison, probably this one when it was rebuilt and how that monster she serves would free her again. As these thoughts warred

in her mind, her wand gestured to the rock she had braced herself on as she took her lashes. It rose slowly and with considerable effort on Tonks's part. The boulder easily weighing a ton drifted into the air centimeter by precious centimeter until it hovered roughly a meter in the air. Sweat poured down her brow from the strain as the rock drifted above the captured death eater. The shadow of the boulder passed over Bellatrix's face as she ceased her taunting of her niece.

"What are you doing Nymphadora?"

"You were sentenced to this island until you die. I am just part of the process. You killed Sirius. You have harmed so many others. You are a wicked witch. Do you know what happens to wicked witches?"

"No!" Bellatrix Lestrange shrieked as Tonks released her spell bringing the rock roughly the size of an office desk down on her head and chest. Tonks took a deep breath as she watched her aunt's legs spasm for a second. She felt Sturgis Podmore's hand on her shoulder and turned to look at him in the light of a half moon. She sobbed into his arms for a moment. He consoled her as best he could for a moment. After a moment, she looked up at him.

"Ding Dong! The Wicked Witch is dead." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"Tonks! We need a way off this rock now. Someone is bound to come looking for her any minute now." He whispered.

She sniffed loudly and wiped her tears away. "You're right." He was scared for her when she walked to the edge. He thought the currently overemotional young woman might actually jump, but instead she waved her wand over the side and summoned a broom from the rocks below. She looked at it in appreciation.

"Well looks like I got the Death Eater's new broom instead of Karen's. I guess I will just have to keep it. Climb on Sturgis."

"We can go faster if you carry me in your robes. No rips in your pockets are there?" He said as she checked before shaking her head. Tossing Bella's wand back to her, he transformed back into his hamster self and was deposited in her inner pocket. She kicked off

and sped into the night heading for the coast. Sturgis heard her mutter something he couldn't quite place as she looked back at the shrinking island.

"I think I'll miss you most of all." She whispered her thoughts on Moody and Shackbolt.

--- (Scene Break Auror Headquarters) ---

The tired voice of Amos Diggory emanated from the wireless set, "At approximately ten o'clock last night, forces belonging to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named attacked the prison at Azkaban. A large battle was fought and casualties were sustained on both sides. We do not have precise details at the moment, but will release them after proper verification pending notification of the families. During this time of concern, rest assured that your government is taking all necessary steps to ensure your safety. Our hopes and prayers go out to the families and friends of the prison workers. In the next edition of the papers there will be an up to date list and pictures of all prisoners that were detained on the island. Please keep a watchful eye and report any sightings of escapees to the authorities at once."

In the first light of the morning, Rufus Scrimgeour felt his age as he continued to assess the loss of life. He had just gotten off the floor with Diggory having helped the distraught man prepare a statement to the papers and the Wizarding Wireless Network. The most recent census of Wizarding Britain estimated the population to be just under twenty thousand. For the lives of probably over fifty wizards and witches to end on a single night, could only be described as a mind numbing tragedy. Compounding this fact was the sobering news that most of the fallen were the protectors of the population. The masses would feel more at risk than ever.

'The papers were going to have a field day with this. Between this and the Wizengamot being unable to appoint a minister, we are teetering on the brink of anarchy! That's just what the Dark Lord wants. If we fall apart there will be no resistance. Something must be done and soon.'

He sat back down at his desk, mechanically processing the latest reports and dispatching his forces. From his comfortable chair, he



began to attack the problem at hand. His dayshift commander, Ada Dawson came in with the latest battle damage assessments and casualty lists from Saint Mungo's.

"Director, I have two three person teams on brooms with Omnioculars headed to the prison. Team one will make a pass at one kilometer above the prison and immediately return. The second team will check for any active resistance from either the Death Eaters or dementors on the perimeter with orders to fall back from engagement. The cursebreakers have disconnected Azkaban from access to our wards and they estimated that Azkaban's wards collapsed at one o'clock this morning. The best guess at this point is that the muggles will notice it within seventy-two hours. The cursebreakers say it will take a minimum of twenty-four hours to properly conceal the island again assuming a standard team of eight. Adding a second team will cut time down to sixteen hours. From the coast, the dementor attacks ceased rather abruptly. The last was reported around three this morning. There have been no further sightings. I have been in contact with the ministry's oblivation squads and they are already en route to the affected areas. I have two four person squads escorting them. If it is acceptable, I will going to double the patrols in Diagon Alley as a show of force."

"Yes Ada. That will be fine. The public needs to see Aurors out and about. They may wear the black armbands over their robes." He said knowing what his people would be requesting. If not now, they would be requesting it soon. "Ada, we've had a rough couple of weeks. I want you to take over as acting Head of Aurors. You are going to have to juggle personnel. Most of our losses were backshift personnel. The trainee program is only running at sixty percent capacity. We may see an influx of applicants. Do your best to find some quality amongst the rubbish. When the Wizengamot meets later today, we will need to make alternative arrangements for prisoners. That is if they can get it together and appoint a minister. Don't get too comfortable with your acting position. I may toss my name in for minister. If that happens expect a bump to acting DMLE."

His subordinate took it in stride. She had suspected Rufus's political aspirations for quite some time now. Ada Dawson was an above average field agent, but she was a logistical genius. For the past five

years, she had kept the dayshift running like a well-oiled machine. Her abilities were about to be put to the ultimate test.

"It's going to require a lot of overtime. We'll probably need to combine second and third shift and go on twelve-hour shifts for the near future. For what it is worth, we could convert Warehouse Eleven into a temporary prison for Death Eaters and drop it under the Fidelius charm. It would require much less manpower."

"I like the idea. There will probably be some objection to that Ada. Secret prisons won't sit well with the public for very long. The idea will meet with some resistance. We may actually be able to cut our manpower needs further by hiring private contractors to manage the prison."

They continued discussing possible options as one of the dayshift floor kiddies brought a breakfast plate in for them. Auror Dawson finished her breakfast quickly and left to manage the floor operations at Auror Headquarters. He sighed as a runner brought in a report from the ministry that someone had let an inferi loose inside the ministry building. One wizard was killed and a witch was badly injured, before the creature had been destroyed. He learned with dismay that the inferi was Fudge's former assistant Percy Weasley. A shame, really the boy had seemed competent enough and had already mastered the inner workings of the ministry. He had hoped to use him at the very least in his transitional team.

From outside he heard the voice of Aaron Jennings, his administrative assistant. "I am sorry Madame, but the Director is not seeing anyone unless it is directly related to the current crisis."

"This is a matter of extreme importance, young man." A female voice insisted.

Rufus opted to come out of his office. There he saw Mafalda Hopkirk, the head of the Improper Use of Magic office arguing with Jennings. The frumpy looking old woman had a wild look in her eyes and several sheets of parchment in her hands. He never particularly liked the woman, but her office significantly cut down on the amount of false alarms and kept the underage wizards and witches in line. He

also knew she was on shaky ground after one of her workers had been caught supplying information to the Death Eaters.

"Relax Aaron. I am sure Madame Hopkirk is aware of yesterday's events and that she would not bother me without due cause. Please come in, I can only spare a few minutes."

"Of course director. Thank you for seeing me." She said closing the door behind them.

"And what can I do for the director of the Improper Use of Magic Office today?"

"I have these records from last night. They are most troubling. It concerns Harry Potter and Susan Bones."

"I was under the impression that both were emancipated yesterday. They should no longer be your concern."

"Yes, that is true. Normally the tracking and detection charms disappear on their seventeenth birthday. In the event of emancipation, they need to come to the office and have the charms removed. They did not and we were still recording them."

"Your point is?" He was interested, but his surly nature was starting to show.

"Perhaps it is best that you just look at them." She handed him the parchment.

He scanned the record of Amelia's niece first. There were several patronus spells and the tracking charm showed that they were in the areas of the dementor attacks. He applauded her bravery. If she were anything like her aunt, the girl would be a powerful witch, remarkable that she was doing a patronus at all for someone her age. The parchment for Potter listed a ridiculous number of spells almost like he had gone 'magic happy' like many teenagers do when they can first do magic. Unfortunately, the list looked nothing like what one would expect for a wizards coming out party.

‘Some minor concealment glamours, patronus, several medical spells hmmm. Looks like the boy was giving first aid. Reset a broken bone. A couple of repairing spells. And what is this?’

Scrimgeour’s eyes stopped on the next two entries. ‘Unknown Spell Magnitude Level Five.’ He raised a bushy eyebrow in disbelief. The magical detection equipment in that office was some of the most comprehensive in the entire world. The device knew more spells than any twenty wizards. For it to encounter a spell that it did not know was significant, but not unheard of. That said, for the unknown spell to be magnitude five was frightening. The last unknown level five event was recorded during the final battle between Dumbledore and Grindelwald. No one save Dumbledore knew what transpired, but it was widely speculated that Grindelwald was attempting either a dimensional rift or a demonic summoning with no prior preparation. Whatever it was, it had been unsuccessful but it still registered as a massive event. When the Dark Lord and Dumbledore duelled in the ministry recently, it was recorded as a level five event due to the sheer magical power of the individuals involved. The close proximity caused the device to be saturated and unusable for two straight days. Both of those wizards were among the two hundred or so wizards and witches in the world capable of producing a level five event by themselves. Less than ten resided in Britain alone! Yet a boy, who had only completed five years of training, produced two within a fifteen minute period.

When he spoke his voice faltered. "Are you certain the device is functioning correctly? This isn’t some mistake?"

"No, it has been working correctly since the saturation. It was even confirmed by the general detection equipment. Director, I am not only concerned about that, but look at the rest of the spells."

He continued on after the two level five spells. From there it looked like Mr. Potter had gotten into a fight. He saw a wide variety of combat spells. He stopped at the last four spells - *Avada Kedavra*, two *Crucios* and a portkey. Harry Potter cast three unforgivable curses! Rufus Scrimgeour stared at the parchment in front of him for a long minute before making up his mind.

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Madame Hopkirk. Officially, this conversation never happened. Obliviate your night shift if you feel it is necessary. I will investigate this personally."

"I understand completely, Director. This never happened."

He escorted her back out into the central area. It was filling with the rest of the day shift coming out of Dawson's briefing. He saw the young dispatcher, who had impressed him last night working with the dayshift dispatcher completing the reports that would normally be done by the missing Tompkins. He walked over to them trailed by his assistant.

"Young lady, what is your name again?" He asked.

"It's Lavender Brown, sir."

"I need you to do two things for me, Miss Brown. The first is I will need you to take over the dispatcher desk for the backshift. I do not believe Mr. Tompkins will be returning. What is your current grade?"

"Intern Auror Floo Dispatcher grade two, sir."

"Get rid of the intern title and consider yourself promoted to Grade Three. Jennings will draw up the necessary paperwork. You will report back here at three to meet with Auror Dawson, who is acting head of Aurors. She will let you know who the new backshift watch commander is. The second thing is we need to find that cousin of yours. I need to find her and Harry Potter."

--- (Scene Break) ---

The vampire in front of him was fast, unbelievably fast. Had his wand not already been in his hand, Harry would have been doomed. As it was, Harry barely managed to cast a banishing spell, catching the creature in mid-leap. The vampire got within a foot of him before the power of the spell washed over him. Harry's spell propelled his opponent backward into the ticket window smashing the glass.

Harry faced the remaining three vampires, who were now looking up from their meals. One blurred and transformed into a wolf; charging

Harry. He sent a laceration curse at the gray she-wolf and followed it with a bone crusher. The wolf howled in pain and thrashed on the ground, her front legs bent awkwardly as she tried to move forward. Harry spun, but the third vampire was upon him. Its shadow blocking the light from the cinema's marquee. Harry ducked the slashing hand with claw-like fingers. The vampire's second blow was a closed fist that smashed into his shoulder and drove him backward with an unnatural strength. His shoulder was on fire. It felt as if the vampire had augmented his inhuman strength with a wandless banishment spell. Harry bounced twice across the sidewalk and rolled onto the pavement. A loud crack signaled incoming apparition and Bill Weasley arrived into the midst of the battle.

Bill immediately found himself struggling with the fourth vampire. He cast a bright light spell directly in its face temporarily blinding the vampire. It slashed wildly with its clawed hand opening up the left side of Bill's face and cutting into his chest below his right shoulder. Bill yelled in agony and sank to the ground. He stabbed his wand up into the face of the dazed vampire and cast his most powerful severing charm, decapitating the monster and sending a geyser of blood into the air. Bill hissed in pain as the blood of the dead creature contaminated his open wounds and made them burn with a hellish fire.

Bill's screams shook Harry out of his confusion. The vampire that struck Harry turned toward Bill, momentarily forgetting Harry. Without any hesitation Harry thrust his wand out and said the one incantation that immediately came to mind. There were two vampires left, but he and Bill were both injured.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Harry watched the green light smash into the vampire and drop it like a lifeless doll. He staggered to his feet with his left arm dangling uselessly, no doubt dislocated. Wincing in pain from the grinding of bones he felt from his collarbone. He chanced a glance at the she-wolf. The laceration curse had struck true and left the wolf's head connected by only a few tendons, reminding Harry of his house ghost Sir Nicolas. He knelt by Bill and summoned water to flush the festering wounds. Bill's screams subsided, but he passed out from the pain. Harry tried a pair of wound closure spells that failed abysmally.

Harry trained his wand on the last remaining vampire, which was regarding him from a crouched position on the ticket counter. A loud crack announced the arrival of Susan and Emmeline Vance. They two witches looked in shock at the number of bodies and the gory scene that greeted them at the front of the theatre.

Never taking his eyes off the vampire Harry said, "Emmeline, as soon as you are able to, apparate Bill to St. Mungo's. He is cut up pretty bad and vampire blood got into the open wounds. I flushed them out, but the wounds won't close. He needs professional assistance quickly."

Emmeline ran over and knelt by Bill with a look of anguish on her face. She took several deep breaths to try and compose herself before she wrapped arms around him.

"Harry, you and Susan go back to where we apparated into this town. I will come and get you as soon as I get Billy to the healers." She disappeared with a very loud crack. Her concentration clearly not at it's best.

Susan stood there looking at the soulless muggles and dead vampires with her wand clenched in her hands. She noticed Harry was still holding his wand on someone. She moved to his side and aimed her wand at the person regarding him from the shattered window.

"Why are you here, vampire?" Harry demanded.

"None of your business boy. Take your little friend and leave. I'll even let you go." Coedus spat.

"Brave words considering what I did to your two friends. You saw what I just did, so you know I won't hesitate to kill you."

"It is impressive to see the killing curse from one so young. What in Merlin's name are they teaching at Hogwarts these days?" The vampire said casually. They both ignored Susan's gasp of surprise.

'Harry used the killing curse?'

Harry enunciated his next sentence spitting out each word. "Quit stalling and answer my fucking question."

"As I said, it is no business of yours." Coedus barely finished the sentence when he felt Harry's response.

"*Crucio!*" Harry felt the power course out his wand. For the first time, he was knowingly using this spell. His actions against Bellatrix in the atrium could be attributed to his overwhelming grief. The killing curse he just used, well it was necessary to save Bill and it was performed in the one instance that was allowed by law. This was different. He was torturing someone or something. Raw anger did not fuel his spell. Harry had to know what these vampires were doing here. He compensated with raw power.

It had been many decades since Coedus had felt the agony of that curse. His natural resistance weakened the effect of the torture curse, but the boy was very powerful and the pain caused him to spasm and fall from the counter forward onto the sidewalk. He landed with a thud and continued to twitch. Harry held the curse on the vampire for ten full seconds before releasing it.

"I find it odd that a group of vampires would be out and about in the same area as a dementor attack on the night Voldemort is trying to free his Death Eaters from Azkaban. I don't believe in coincidences. Now are you going to answer my damn question?"

Coedus glared back at his assailant. He was shocked both that the boy would dare invoke the Dark Lord's name and by the raw power behind the banisher and the torture curse. He recalled his duels with the young Albus Dumbledore.

"Fine, have it your way. *Crucio!*" Harry shouted making Coedus's screams split the night air for a second time. He held the curse for about twenty seconds before releasing it. Unconsciously, Susan took several steps away from Harry.

"I am growing weary of this vampire. My next spell is the killing curse. I need to be leaving and if you are not going to tell me what I wish to know, then you are no use to me. Why are you here?"



"We were here at the Dark Lord's invitation, for a demonstration of his power. He wishes clans to serve in his armies."

Harry pondered the answer for a moment. "Where do your clans stand on this?"

"They are not yet convinced of his dominion. Yet there is the delightful idea of seeing the streets of this country run red with blood."

With a wave of his wand, Harry cast an *Incarcerous* spell, binding Coedus in ropes. A second spell levitated the vampire into the air. He looked at Susan and saw the unreadable look on her face.

"Let's go back to the apparation point. The muggle authorities will be here any minute and I still have questions to ask this man."

Susan nodded numbly as she wondered if Harry was going dark. She had just witnessed him use two unforgivable curses and it sounded like he had used a third. Where was the boy that was sleeping in her lap only ten minutes ago? She climbed onto her broom and kept her wand trained on the trussed vampire. It was also pointed in the general direction of Harry Potter. They flew at a slow pace. It was a test of her loyalty. Part of her wanted to break away and fly away into the darkness, but looking at Harry's useless left arm and seeing his obvious pain helped firm her resolve. It took two minutes to get back to the apparation point. Harry floated his captive up against a rock, released his ropes and cast a sticking charm pinning him to the rock. He was certain the vampire could free himself, but it would cause him considerable pain. From the look on the vampire's face, he knew it as well.

"What is your name?" Harry asked.

"Why does a wizard care what a vampire is called?"

"Because it gets old calling you 'vampire' or saying 'hey you'."

"My name is Coedus of the Darkfang Clan. Who might you be?"

"Harry Potter and this is Susan Bones."

"So you are the child, who ended the Dark Lord's first reign."

"I intend to stop the second one, just the same." Harry said with a determined voice.

"So brash. So very certain of yourself. Reminds me of myself back when my flesh was warm."

"How so?"

"I was an auror once. One of the best and now I am simply Coedus."

"Were the others from your clan?"

"No, they each represented one of the other three major European clans. The female was a Czech. The one you killed was from the Ukraine and the other was from France. My adopted clan is based in Italy, but I was originally an Englishman."

"Coedus, I assume you are going to report your findings back to your clan. How do you think the other clans will react to the loss of their representatives?"

"They will be most displeased. Our safety was assured. The Dark Lord will lose some credibility with the clans. They may hold him to the original agreement, which promised our service after England falls. I cannot speak for certain. The French vampires are the most likely to align with him. Many of them are refugees from when we were driven from the British Isles. So, how is it that someone as young as you can successfully cast the Unforgiveables?"

"I seem to have a knack for being on their receiving end."

"Here I thought Wulf was letting his school slip."

"The Wulf?"

"Albus Wulfric Percival Brian Dumbledore. He used to hate his full name. I called him Wulf."

"You know him?"

"A very long time ago, we were classmates. He even showed some pity after my transformation, when most turned their backs on me." Harry felt a pang of sympathy for Coedus. He knew all too well the pain of having people turn their backs on him.

"What is your last name?"

"Coedus is my vampire name. We have no last names. When I was among the living, my name was Darius Octavius Longbottom."

Harry and Susan looked at each other open mouthed. "Really! One of my classmates is Neville Longbottom. He just lost the rest of his family. He might want to know that you are still alive – well not really alive, around."

"The Longbottoms are gone? When? How?" Coedus felt a strange sensation. When his wife, parents, aunts and uncles turned on him, he spent many days hidden in a cave fantasizing about killing every last Longbottom. Now, they are all gone save one.

"Voldemort had them killed last week. Neville was the only one to escape. I am sorry you had to find out from me."

"You are a strange one Harry Potter. Minutes ago you were using an unforgivable curse on me and yet here you are apologizing to me for the death of the line that renounced me after my transformation."

"You are talking about people who are dead and gone. Neville Longbottom would never turn his back on family or friends. I am proud to call him my friend."

Coedus watched the wizard's anger flash across his face as he defended his friend. He felt strangely comforted that the Longbottom name still meant something. He suppressed these ancient feelings. Coedus would not feel anything for any magical people.

"I seriously doubt he would acknowledge a vampire as family."

"Then you don't know the first thing about him! His parents are still alive, but they may as well be dead. They are in the long term spell damage ward at St. Mungo's, for the last fifteen years. He visits them

all the time. Too much exposure to the same curse I was using on you - more victims of Voldemort's followers. The same people you would be fighting for."

Those dormant emotions flared again. Coedus remembered what it was like to be Darius Longbottom. He remembered the pride in his family line. Stuck to that rock, he had an epiphany. No matter what name he called himself; he was still a Longbottom. The family motto – 'Family First, Family Last and Family Always' that he had mocked for all these years burned in his mind like the sun in the midday sky.

"Two nights." He said after a moment.

"What?" Harry asked.

"We are to meet the Death Eaters in two nights to tell them what our recommendations to our clans would be. It would be a good place for an ambush. Would it not?"

"Yes, I do believe it would a good spot for an ambush. Where is this meeting going to be held?"

Coedus told him the details of the rendezvous in two nights. They sat in silence and regarded each other. Susan finally found her voice.

"Harry, you used Unforgiveables! Why in Circe's name would you do that? It's criminal! They'll throw you in Azkaban!"

Harry turned to answer her, but Coedus responded instead. He rolled up his sleeve displaying the tattoo on his forearm DCV0016. "Actually, what he did is perfectly legal under British Wizarding Law. Vampires are vermin to be hunted and exterminated. Your laws do not even consider us sentient beings. Obviously, you knew that. Didn't you Harry?"

--- (Scene Break – Flashback to Fifth Year Defense Against the Dark Arts) ---

Harry's mind flashed back to his Defense Against the Dark Arts class last year. One of the few subjects that Dolores Umbridge was actually

passionate about was werewolves and vampires. It often made Harry wonder what dirty secrets lurked in her past.

"The vampire is a wretched abomination. It can be identified by the fangs and pale complexion. Its diet consists of blood. Animal blood can suffice, but human blood is preferred. Mr. Weasley, what would you do if you encountered one?"

Everyone in the class, except 'The Toad' already knew Ron's answer. Even the Slytherins had a hard time not smirking. It was the same answer he had given since Quirrell asked him how to "d-d-d-d-deal with a hinkypunk".

"I would cut its head off." Ron Weasley said not missing a beat. You could hear Hermione's exasperated sigh.

"Excellent answer Mr. Weasley! Decapitation is a proven method against such a foul monster." She did not know that this was his answer for everything. "They cannot abide direct sunlight for very long. It will not kill them as popularly believed, but it will severely weaken them. The stake through the heart will kill one pretty much as it will kill you or me. They are somewhat resistant to magic, so do not expect your spells to have the same affect on them."

She paused smiling wistfully at something before continuing. "Fortunately, your government has enacted several measures to protect you from such vile creatures. First, it is illegal to be an unregistered vampire in England. All vampires must register their presence with the ministry. They will receive a tattoo on their right forearm. It will start with the following three letters followed by four numbers. The letters are DCV, which stand for Dark Creature Vampire. A similar scheme is in place for werewolves replacing the V for a W. Furthermore, by the Dark Creatures Act of 1903 requires that they where a visible 'golden V' on their clothes at all times. Similar motions were made for Werewolves, but unfortunately, this measure failed because that particular brand of monster is only contagious a few days out of the month. These measures have been so successful that there as of today, there are only nine registered vampires in all of England."

"But what about unregistered vampires?" Dean Thomas asked.

Umbridge looked a bit perturbed, whether it was that Thomas asked a question or that a vampire would dare to defy the government. "The same Dark Creatures Act of 1903 grants the wizards and witches of Britain the right to exterminate these monsters using whatever means necessary."

"Even the unforgiveables?" Pansy Parkinson asked.

"Dear child, those curses shouldn't be used on human beings. Vampires, however, are no longer considered human beings. You would be doing the world a favor by destroying such a creature. It's more of a crime to use those curses on a simple farm animal, but you are correct the unforgiveables may be used on an unregistered vampire without any consequences. Well at least there would be no consequences for the witch or wizard. Now for homework, you will write two foot of parchment on the Dark Creatures Act of 1903 and its beneficial effects on society." Dolores Umbridge ignored the fact that this wasn't a History of Magic class. She also ignored the fact that she was speaking to fifteen-year-olds like they were five-year-olds as she wished that so many other creatures could be appended to that act.

--- (End Flashback) ---

"Yes. Last year's defense teacher made us practically memorize the Dark Creatures Act of 1903. She just wished she could add werewolves, centaurs, goblins, trolls and giants to the list. I guess she didn't go into that much detail for your class." Harry said watching the pieces fit together in Susan's mind. She relaxed slightly.

"But why use them Harry? Even if it is allowed?"

"I used the killing curse to save Bill's life. I'd do it again even if it hadn't been a vampire. The others I used, because I may have to use them again someday on him or his Death Eaters. Tonight is a big battle in what is going to be a long war. I am not going to beat him with cheering charms or tickling jinxes."

Susan sighed. Her earlier anger at Harry swiftly becoming a distant memory. "You are right, Harry. I know it; it's just that from the time I was first able to hold a wand it's been drilled into me that those

curses are 'Unforgivable'. I watched that curse end both my Mum and Aunt's life. How can you not expect me to react poorly seeing you use them?"

"I understand Susan. We'll talk about this and other things later."

Susan nodded and tried to lighten the mood. "You mean to tell me you actually learned something from Umbitch."

"Wonders never cease." Harry answered. "Now. What would you like us to do with you Coedus? I can arrange a meeting with Dumbledore if you like. He'll do it just to get back in my good graces."

"You and he are not on very good terms, I take it?"

"At the moment, no. In fact he has much to answer for, the next time I see him, but knowing him he will grant you sanctuary. Susan's family home was damaged by Voldemort. I don't think anyone would look for you there and repairs are not supposed to happen for another week. I can make a portkey for you. Is that okay with you Susan?"

"I guess Harry. We can't exactly take him back with us. No one would look for him there. She picked up a rock. She then touched her wand to her family ring and then to the rock. The rock suddenly had the bones family crest carved into the surface of the rock. She tossed it to the vampire. "If anyone official comes by, you bear my crest and have my permission to be there."

"Thank you, miss. You're a bit young to be head of a family. I see you wear two family rings Harry. Are you really the head of two families?"

"Yes. Susan is the head of her family for the same reason Neville is alone in this world and I head both the Potter and Black families. Toss that to me and I will make it a portkey. As soon as I see Dumbledore, I will send what is left of him to you after I am done with him. Do not leave the property unless you fear for your life. If you have to run come back to this spot in three days time and we'll have someone to meet you. I will let Neville know of your existence. He's been my dorm mate for five years. I think he will be happy and will want to meet you. A house elf will stop by tomorrow evening to see if you require anything. The activation for the portkey is Bones Manor."

Harry cast the portkey charm and then cancelled out his sticking charm allowing Coedus to stand again. He tossed the portkey to him and watched Coedus disappear.

Harry stood up and looked at Susan. She seemed reluctant to meet his gaze. "Susan, do you know if you're Aunt or your Mum had a way of checking in with the portraits in your house?"

"Yes. Auntie had a painting in her office of Uncle Edgar. You want me to have the pictures spy on him?"

"The list of people I trust right now starts with you and doesn't have many other names on it. If I tip off the Order or the Ministry to this meeting in two days, I want to make sure that Riddle is getting doublecrossed, not us!"

"Oh." There was a minute of awkwardness between the two of them. Susan finally broke the silence. "How's your arm?"

"I think my collarbone is broken and my shoulder is dislocated. Once we get back to my house, I will floo Madame Pomfrey. Besides, it's been a long time since I have had to have bones mended. She probably misses me over the summer breaks."

"Harry, I want to apologize. I shouldn't be pushing you right now. The last thing you need right now is a pushy girl in your life right now. I'd be no different then Ginny. Please forgive me."

"It's okay. We're both going to mess up, quite a bit I'd guess. I suspect I will be the one doing the majority of the messing up. All I can ask is that you be patient with me. I just hope in a month you're not regretting this."

"I won't. I promise. Hey you know something? That was our first fight. We seem to be past it now and you know what that means?"

"No. My fight with Cho was the end of that relationship. What comes next?"

"Making up, Harry."



Emmeline Vance returned after another twenty minutes to find the two 'making up'. Susan had cast a pain reducing charm on his damaged shoulder and was very enthusiastic with her apologies. Emmeline smiled and cleared her throat rather loudly. The pair separated, both looking a bit embarrassed.

"How's Bill?"

"They said he will have some nasty scarring, but he'll be fine. You did the right thing flushing the wounds. They are going to keep him overnight. We should get back to headquarters. You both look like you could use some rest."

"Harry's got a dislocated shoulder and a broken collarbone. We should get him looked at."

"Oh, I was going to use my portkey, but that might aggravate his injuries. Here Susan, take the portkey. I will apparate Harry there in a minute after I catch my breath."

Susan disappeared. Emmeline smiled at Harry. "Early in a relationship, nothing works like a good snogging session. Later, you will need a more sophisticated approach, but you're doing fine so far. Come on let's get you back and fixed up."

## Chapter 13 – Naked Hannah

Harry woke from an exhausted sleep. He had slept soundly, repaying the adrenaline debt that had kept him functioning since Percy's death. He surmised that had Tom Riddle tried their mental connection, the Dark Tosser would have received a busy signal or an 'out of order' notice. His arm still ached from where Madame Pomfrey had repaired his injuries. He endured Molly Weasley's 'gaze of doom' as she rushed to the floo to travel to St. Mungo's. She didn't seem very pleased. Given the pain Harry was in after Susan's numbing charm wore off, he didn't really care what she thought. He felt a little guilty that he had run off into an ambush, simply to put some distance between himself, Susan and the argument they were having. It did teach him a valuable lesson: don't think about stupid crap during a battle! He had gotten hurt and so had Bill. If Harry hadn't used the killing curse, Bill would by all rights be dead.

Just about the whole house was still awake and waiting on their return. Hermione and Ginny made a big show of immediately going up to their room. Harry recalled chuckling that they wanted to make sure he was safe, so they could kill him later. He shook his head and tried to burrow back into the pillow. If everyone was looking for a full report on the night, they were sadly mistaken. Harry pretty much ignored all the questions until a tired looking Madame Pomfrey arrived. When she had asked what caused all the damage, he simply replied 'Vampire,' causing everyone to gasp. Fortunately, the mediwitch was conditioned to Harry's lifestyle, and took it quite well, only stopping to mutter several things under her breath that would later make Harry blush, before resuming her examination. There was a second gasp when he removed his shirt, revealing a mass of bruises that covered the left side of his chest up to his shoulder, and down to the left elbow. Susan kept a brave face, but was obviously very distressed. Harry watched as Susan whispered instructions to her house elf who disappeared with a pop to keep an eye on the vampire at her house.

The noise generated by Harry mentioning vampires was enough to wake the portrait of Mrs. Black, who commenced screaming insults. Amazingly enough, when Harry yelled back 'shut your foul mouth, you dead hag!' she immediately quieted. That fact did not register

until Harry was halfway up the stairs, and in no shape or mood to go back down and question the portrait. Someone could have come to him with a spell that would end Voldemort's life once and for all, and Harry would not have been interested.

He sat up on his bed and reached for his glasses. There was a strange and strong smell in the room. It was completely out of place in a room full of boys. He rubbed his eyes, put his glasses on and waited for the answer to come into focus.

"Busy night, Harry?" The voice of Hannah Abbott asked examining her freshly polished nails under the light of the morning sun.

'Oh how splendid, the best friend interrogation.' Harry thought. "You could say that Hannah. That's a nice color on you." He decided to take the safe route and send a compliment her way, despite the fact he knew very little about nail colors.

"Thanks. It is Lisa's though. She has very good taste. How's your shoulder?"

"It's a bit tender. Instead of really painful, it's just sore now. Where's Susan?"

"Still sleeping. Why don't you silence the room, Harry? I kicked the boys out. They're eating breakfast already." Harry wasn't sure if this was a good thing or a bad thing. He waved his wand at the door. For good measure he aimed a second one at the portrait on the wall. The wizard in the painting gave a rather indignant look and left the frame.

"Done. Something on your mind?" Harry asked amazed at how much one day had matured him. Yesterday, he would have been intimidated at the sight of a female in his room and him in only pajamas. Since then he had killed two dementors and two vampires...besides, Hannah had too much 'cuteness' to be that intimidating.

"When I sent you up to check on Susan yesterday, I was happy to find out you came back dating. You leave from the bank yesterday and come back engaged. I am just wondering whether if I leave my

best friend alone with you today, you will come back with rings on your fingers.”

Harry decided to push her buttons a bit to see if he could rile her up. “No. You’d have to come along. I am sure Susan wants you to be her maid of honor and I still have to get a best man.” He said watching her eyes bulge. He knew Hannah was a very emotional girl. She had been so flustered during her O.W.Ls that she had created one of the more memorable scenes from the school year during her Transfiguration OWL.

“What? You ...” she started.

“What’s there to explain, Hannah? I have a year, well now less than a year to get married. She has to get married a year from her birthday. Hey, when’s her birthday?”

“September the fifth. Shouldn’t you know that, being her fiancé?”

“Cheeky, Abbott, very cheeky.”

“Careful, Harry. I might start telling you the wrong flowers and candy to get her.”

“Point taken. So what brings you to my bedroom this morning? Considering hexing me into oblivion? Sorry that sounds so Ginnyish, I am sure she would help, hell Hermione might even want to join in, but you’ll probably get a stern lecture afterwards.” Harry said chuckling.

“No, the only person I’ve considered doing that to lately would be Ginny. I am here to find out how serious you are about my best friend. Are you serious, or is she just an easy way out of a problem that suddenly presented itself?”

“Would you be surprised if I said I wasn’t sure?”

“You’d at least gain some points for honesty.”

“Why her and not Lee, err Ginny?”

"Susan's more mature. She's more capable of dealing with my life. She's still there after a week that would have destroyed other witches. If you had to pick one Puff that most resembled Helga's ideals, my guess is that it would be her."

"So she has been through a lot. Does that make her a pity project?" Hannah said, trying to play Devil's advocate. She was pleased with Harry's answer though.

"If she's one, then I must be one hell of a charity case. I still don't know why she likes me."

"I'll answer that one for you. There are a few other next girlfriend pools out there, but none of them generated as much interest as yours. Like it or not, girls like you, Harry. Even some of the Slytherins were betting! Merlin, you and I almost went out."

Harry started checking his memory for oblivations, "Uh, that's news to me."

Hannah sighed. "Yes. I suppose you never knew. Harry, I have a gift and a bit of a curse too like your Parseltongue. I am a receiving empath. I can feel other people's emotions. Sometimes in large crowds, it overpowers me. I was between you and Umbitch during my Transfiguration OWL and quite honestly it would have been easier on me if you had been trying to kill each other!"

"I guess that is how you always seem to be able to tell when people are lying to you. That said, I still don't remember you and me almost going out."

"Well, my little gift was what told me that you weren't the Heir of Slytherin. I could feel your pain when everyone was pointing fingers." Harry recalled her defending him to a table full of Hufflepuffs around the time Justin was petrified. "So after that year was over, I spent all summer figuring out how I was going to go out with you in our third year. I had it all planned out. You didn't stand a chance."

"So what happened?" Harry thought allowing him a moment to consider how his third year would have been with Hannah as a girlfriend. The idea had a certain appeal to it. It might have been fun.

'Too bad, though I never thought the whole pigtails thing worked for her. Glad she isn't doing it anymore! Probably trying a more mature look for Justin.'

"Dementors. I spent most of the year hiding in my dorm room. If it wasn't for Occlumency, Mum and Dad would have had to pull me out of school. As it was, I had to leave school twice. That's when Justin and I became so close. He really helped me through the rough times. By the time the Dementors were gone, Justin and I were already serious and you and I were a missed opportunity. He'll probably be a bit put off that you and Susan will beat us to the altar."

"You know Occlumency!"

"Kind of a necessity in my life. Either that or avoid large crowds until I'm old and gray. You must too, since I haven't been able to pick up much from you anymore. That was part of your allure back then. You were an emotional volcano. It's a good thing we were so young. I was rather obsessed with you for a time. Mind if I try to probe your defenses?" She said pulling her wand out.

"Have at it." Harry said with his shields firmly in place. He doubted Hannah Abbott was in Voldemort's league. "Aren't you worried about Madame Hopkirk?"

"Do you seriously believe they could detect obscure mind magic in a concealed house? I only trust the ministry to screw up. I am seldom disappointed. Okay, *legilimens*."

Harry barely felt her as she impacted on his walls. The same walls that he had spent every sleepless night since the death of his godfather erecting, fueling with both his pain and magic - the same walls that protected him from the foulness on the other end of his scar. There was nothing like the anguish and guilt over a foolishly preventable loss to galvanize him into action. Hannah actually staggered back two paces.

"Shit Harry!" Both hilarious and impressive in that, Hannah didn't seem the type to use vulgar language. "Now that's a core shield! I'll probably have a headache after that. Where are your tripwires?"

“Tripwires?”

“Tripwires, your outer defenses that alert you to raise your core. You don’t keep that monster up all the time do you?”

“Mostly. I reinforce it as soon as I feel him. I clear my thoughts before I go to sleep. It pretty much stops him except for times like last night.”

“You’re kidding!” Hannah was gaping at him.

“No, I’m not kidding. Care to explain why this is important?”

“Harry, if I tried to keep my core shield up all the time, I would literally pass out after twelve hours! I know I’ve tried, but here you are doing it all day and casting spells. Wait right here.” She said practically running out of the room. Harry took the break to slide out of bed and put a dressing robe over his pajamas. Two minutes later, she came back with her sister in tow and an amulet in her hands.

“This better be good Hannah!”

“Go ahead probe him.” Hannah said, and then blushed a second later at her younger sister’s sly smirk. “Behave!”

Harry braced himself. The probe was actually a bit stronger than Hannah’s causing him to cock an eyebrow. Chelsea sank to her knees, obviously not expecting the backlash.

“Ow! Ow! Ow! You could have warned me!”

“Would you have believed me?”

“No.”

“Get this! He doesn’t use tripwires. He keeps that thing up all day!”

“You’re shittin me!” The younger Abbott looked considerably more comfortable using such language.

“Um, I am still in the room. I’m not a thing you know.”

“Sorry. Harry, this is a mind shield. It’s really rare and expensive. Receiving empaths like me use them every now and then to rest themselves. It doesn’t last very long. I doubt it would keep You Know Who out for twenty seconds if he was attacking, but I want to do an experiment. Cast a light spell.” As Harry complied, Hannah walked over to him and put the necklace around his neck. “Okay, keep the light spell going and drop that thing you call a core shield.”

Harry released his shield and the light easily doubled in intensity. He didn’t feel like he was thrusting any more magic into his spell than normal. There was no ‘bucking’ feeling like when he cast his patronus. “Chelsea, are you an empath too?” Harry asked before canceling the light spell.

“Yeah, but I project rather than receive. I don’t have to worry about everyone else’s moods. They have to worry about mine. Now I need a shirt that says, *I tried to get into Harry’s mind and all I got was this lousy headache!*” She answered rubbing her temples and chuckling.

Harry took a moment to consider everything he had just learned as he erected his mental barrier and removed the mind shield. He wondered how much it would cost to acquire one or more. If he had all his magic available during a fight, he would be in a much better position to launch more damaging attacks. It was certainly worth considering. Harry hoped that Hannah could show him how to create these ‘tripwires’ that she kept mentioning. He also realized that Occulmency training helped develop and strengthen the witch or wizard’s magical core.

“Hannah, can you show me how to build tripwires?”

“Okay. Here, I’ll let you see what they look like to give you an idea? Give me a second. Since I don’t know how powerful your attack is, I want to get my core up just in case you smash through too quickly.” There was a fifteen second pause. “Alright. Have at it, Harry!”

He cast the spell and locked eyes with her. It was different from the one time he had gotten into Snape’s mind. Memories flashed by like quicksilver confusing him. He could sense her core shield at the center as he struggled forward through memory after memory. Hannah was laughing. Hannah was crying. Hannah kissing Justin.



Hannah lashing out at Chelsea. Hannah studying. Hannah cooking. Hannah naked in the bathroom mirror!

Harry abruptly broke contact blushing and not wanting to meet Hannah's eyes. There was silence and then – giggling.

"You did it didn't you? You hit him with 'Naked Hannah'. And you say I'm mean!"

"He was shredding my outer layers. Another second and he would have been attacking my core. There was no way I would have been able to get my core up in time if I didn't already have it up! So, yes, I hit him with 'Naked Hannah'."

Harry found his voice. "That was a dirty trick, Hannah."

"It sure is. Your outer layers are there to protect your core, warn you and slow an attacker. The best recommendation is to alternate emotions like happy memories, then sad ones, joy, then anger. It is supposed to unbalance the person trying to attack your mind. Now, I have only ever had a couple of people attack me up until now. That was a scary experience seeing how fast you were breaking through. I'm sorry I panicked and threw up 'Naked Hannah' to chase you out."

"It worked."

"But that is the outer ring concept. Multiple layers to deter someone while you raise up your core. I think Chelsea and I can show you how to make the outer layers. Who taught you?"

"Snape."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Our parents brought in a private tutor, when I was eight. He never mentioned outer layers?"

"No. That damned git!"

“Well at least you have one massive core shield! Since, we know who is going to be attacking your mind; we can select memories that will be the most distasteful for him to see. Like all those times you have beaten him so far!” Hannah exclaimed rather enthusiastically.

“Hannah, Chelsea, if I do the DA again this year, I want you to start teaching people Occulmency. In fact, since it can be done underage, try starting with Lisa, Susan and Hermione while we are still here. Do you mind?”

“Why?”

“Well it is like exercising your magical core right? It will help make people stronger, even if they only master basic shields.”

“Sure, we’ll do it.”

“Sis is right. It will be fun.”

They talked for a few more minutes before Harry asked the girls to leave so he could get a quick shower. They agreed to help him learn how to make the outer tripwires in return for him teaching them spells when they got back to school. The hot shower felt really good on his sore shoulder. He planned on taking Susan to the Ministry to collect her aunt’s effects from her office. Hopefully, he would get a chance to speak to Bill today. Most importantly, he wanted to start practicing spells, now that he was emancipated.

He changed quickly and headed out his door. Susan was there talking to Hannah. He gave Susan a quick kiss. She looked like she wanted nothing more than to crawl right back into her bed. She had a severe case of ‘pillow head’ and would probably have a fit if she realized it.

“Morning, Harry,” she yawned.

“Hi. Did you sleep okay?”

“Pretty much. You?”

"Like a rock. Haven't slept that well in a long time. Anything you want to do today?"

"No. How about you?"

"Well Hannah convinced me that it would be a bad idea for us to go and get married today so that's off the table." Harry said with a grin.

Susan scowled at her friend. "And what else did Hannah and you discuss?"

Harry gave a big grin of vengeance as he started down the steps. "This and that. Hannah and Chelsea are going to do some special training for the DA this year. Did you know she's a natural blonde?" He didn't dare turn back around as he hurried down the steps.

Once at the bottom of the steps his smile quickly disappeared. It was due mostly to the fact that everyone was staring at him. Dobby held a plate out piled high with breakfast food, which Harry graciously accepted. He sat at the table next to Neville, who was reading. Mrs. Weasley came in from the parlor.

"How is Bill?" Harry asked.

"He is recovering. I will thank you to not take anymore of my family out on your little adventures." The older woman glared at Harry. Neville looked up from his book. Harry sensed all other activity in the parlor come to a screeching halt.

A mere two weeks ago, Harry would be cringing and looking for a place to hide preferably in another room. Harry met her gaze. "Excuse me?"

"You heard what I said, young man. Your presence around my family results in them getting hurt and I will not tolerate it any more. You have the nerve to come down here with a smile on your face! Running off to fight dementors is bad enough, but then you have to go and pick a fight with a group of vampires! Poor Ron and Hermione still have those awful scars, Ginny was lucky to escape with only had a broken ankle and now Bill. Perhaps next full moon you can lead a pack of werewolves into Fred and George's shop."

Harry's response came out more like a growl. "Unless I am mistaken, Bill and Emmeline Vance were in charge last night. I volunteered to go along with them. They are the Order members. Your adult son is the Order's Dark Creature expert, yet here you are in my kitchen, issuing me ultimatums while I'm trying to eat breakfast. You can conjure a patronus. You could have helped us fight the dementors and vampires. You could have come along, but you didn't. Don't go projecting your guilt on me." Harry spat the last two sentences out, wondering if Hermione would catch the references to the grief counseling books she had loaned him. Probably not.

"Well I never! After all we've done for you!" She huffed. "Stay away from my family!"

"Whatever. Feel free to stay away from me." Harry muttered turning back to his meal. Out of the corner of Harry's eye he saw something that caught his interest. The picture of Mrs. Black actually had a wand out in her portrait and had been pointing it at Molly Weasley. She was now putting it back into a holster. Was she about to cast a spell? Could portraits cast spells? That piqued his interest. He would need to question the portrait later to discover the reason for her behavior. A creak on the step caused him to turn around. He saw Susan heading back up the steps. He glanced into the parlor. Ginny and Hermione looked angrily at him. Ron was actually staring at his mother with a hard look on his face. Terry, Mandy and the Turpins were just staring on in wonder.

Mrs. Weasley continued to glare at him, but she didn't have anything on Snape. He was used to eating with someone trying to burn a hole through him with their eyes. She gave up a minute later and went into the parlor closing the door behind her. He shrugged and looked at Neville, who was already standing and starting to head upstairs.

"I'm going to go upstairs and read."

"Before you go, I need to talk to you. One of the vampires we ran into yesterday said his name was originally Darius Longbottom."

"Did you kill him?" Neville asked, suddenly interested.

"No. He's hiding at Susan's house. I guess he knows Dumbledore. I will need to arrange a meeting between the two of them. He gave us some information that we may be able to use about the Death Eaters."

"Was he working for them?"

"No. He is part of a clan in Italy. I guess Voldemort is trying to recruit from the various clans in Europe. They were there for a demonstration of his power. Three of them won't ever report back to their clans."

"Why did he give you the information?"

"I told him that Voldemort pretty much ordered your entire family's death."

Harry and Neville were still talking about the implications of Neville's vampire relative when the floo connection activated. The first figure that stumbled out was a stocky man in his mid forties with stringy blondish hair. Harry recognized the face as one of the advance team who came and retrieved him from the Dursley's last year. His name was Sturgis Podmore. Harry vaguely recalled that he had been arrested trying to break into the Department of Mysteries last year. For a brief moment, Harry wondered if Fudge had considered arresting him and the others who followed him there. Sturgis set the Nimbus 2001 he was carrying against the kitchen wall.

A moment later a second figure stumbled out of the kitchen floo. She was female and cowed and immediately fell into a rather ungraceful mess on the kitchen floor. Harry had a good idea who was behind the hooded cloak.

"Hello Tonks. Mr. Podmore."

"Wotcher Harry." She said still on the floor. The greeting lacked any enthusiasm whatsoever.

"Please call me Sturgis. Are any of the Order Members here?" He said helping Tonks to her feet.

“Only if you count Mrs. Weasley. Tonks is something wrong?”

She sat at the table and buried her head in her hands and continued sobbing. Harry looked at Sturgis. The older man shook his head from side to side as if to say ‘Not now’.

“Come on Tonks. We’ll take you upstairs and I will call Poppy, so she can look at you.” As the auror stood her cloak fell back and Harry and Neville stared into the face of Bellatrix Lestrange. Harry gasped in shock and Neville was grabbing furiously for his wand. Sturgis acted quickly and pulled Tonks behind him.

“It’s Tonks! He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did something to her. She’s stuck like this! Put the damn wand away!” Harry took his hand off of his wand that he did not actually draw. Neville had his out and was still pointing it. Harry saw a look in Neville Longbottom’s eyes he hadn’t seen before. Instinctively, Harry grabbed Neville’s arm and pulled it downwards.

“Take it easy Nev. It’s not her. This is Tonks. She’s a friend. She was here yesterday.”

The look in Neville’s eyes faded. He looked away, embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I told myself that if I ever saw her again, I’d kill her.”

“Don’t worry. You won’t ever see the real Lestrange ever again. She’s good and dead.”

“You were at Azkaban last night!” Harry exclaimed.

Molly and the rest came back into the kitchen. There were a few additional gasps when they saw Tonks’s face, which only made her sob harder. Harry put his arm around her and gently moved her in the direction of the stairs.

“Sturgis go ahead and call Madame Pomfrey. She was probably going to come out here and check me over anyway. I’ll take Tonks up to our room. Neville, why don’t you read up in the library?”

Harry led Tonks up the stairs, passing the wide-eyed Abbott sisters, and took her into his bedroom. He gestured to his bottom bunk bed.

"I hate it when people ask me if I want to talk about it. If you want me to leave just say so. There's a couple of dreamless sleep potions in the holder, but I would recommend waiting until Madame Pomfrey has looked you over."

Tonks didn't say anything she just sat there staring blankly at the wall for a minute. He recognized the look from staring at himself in the mirror for hours after Sirius died.

Harry knelt in front of her and held both her hands as he watched the tears stream down her face. "Who did we lose?"

"Kingsley and Moody from the Order, and a bunch of my friends." She answered in a broken voice. Harry was a bit stunned to hear that the Order's two best fighters were gone. While he had been discussing Occlumency with Hannah and Chelsea, he was secretly hoping to convince either of the two of them to give him private dueling lessons.

She was sobbing uncontrollably now. "We shouldn't have gone after him. He didn't even take us seriously."

That stopped Harry cold. He felt his anger building. "What did you say? Did you just say that you went after Voldemort?" He ignored her flinch at the name. He didn't remember her ever flinching before, but she had actually fought him and apparently lost rather convincingly.

"Moody thought we could take him."

Harry quickly silenced the door and the portrait again. "Didn't Dumbledore ever tell you the prophecy?"

"The one in the Department of Mysteries? No."

For the next minute Tonks watched in amazement as Harry Potter unleashed a string of expletives that was impressive in variety, venom and descriptiveness. It would certainly be both highly painful and anatomically risky to do that with a bowl of lemon drops. At length, Harry stopped.

“The prophecy says that I am the only one that can kill him. Dumbledore has known it since it was made, before I was even born. Dumbledore will answer for this and everything else!”

Tonks’s face was a mask of shocked anguish as she realized that the lives of two people she looked up to had been needlessly wasted. She had stopped crying and was staring at an extremely irate Harry Potter.

“How long have you known this, Harry?” Tonks asked.

“The fucker told me right after the Department of Mysteries. ‘Sorry about your Godfather, Harry. Oh and by the way, you are the only one who can kill Voldemort. Now run along and behave this summer!’ I am getting used to being treated like this; what I can’t believe is that he never warned you.”

“Harry, He is too strong! Dawlish was with us, too! He took us out like a bunch of rookies. Moody was trying Unforgiveables at the end, and all He did was mock him.”

“I will find a damned way! You’re going to teach me more spells. Dumbledore doesn’t seem to want to. Hell, he didn’t even want me emancipated yesterday. I should be training, but he seems more interested in making sure that I am not learning anything useful.”

The auror was impressed with his determination, but having seen two of the best aurors ever killed so easily found it hard to believe that someone just barely past his O.W.Ls was going to save the world from the Dark Lord. “I’ll show you what I can, but it won’t matter.” She said, sounding defeated.

“Yes it will! Did I know anything when I stopped him the first time? I was a baby in a fucking crib! I can do this! I need your help.” Harry thought it was ironic that he was giving her a pep talk. Maybe if he said it enough times, he would convince himself.

“Okay Harry. I’ll help train you. It’s not like I can go anywhere looking like this.”



"I'm sure they'll fix you. Okay, I am going to go see what is keeping Madame Pomfrey. Call out for Dobby or Trixie if you need anything. I have to go to the Ministry today, but I will find you later and will set up times to work together."

Tonks managed a small smile on her morphed face. "Alright Harry."

"Is Sturgis right? Bellatrix is dead?"

"I killed her. She won't harm anyone else ever again."

"Good. I don't know whether anyone brought Sirius's portrait back yet, but when you get a chance tell it. I am sure he'll be happy." Harry cancelled his privacy charms and ran back downstairs passing the school nurse on the way. He was used to the eyes on him now. He grabbed parchment and a quill and wrote a scathing message.

*Dumbledore,*

Your capacity for fucking things up astounds me! Is it a gift or did you really have to work for it? Right now I don't even trust you to wipe your own ass correctly. I know what you and Mum did to the Dursleys. Moody and Shacklebolt are dead because you didn't warn them to avoid Voldemort! More blood on your hands. Rest assured you will be held accountable. I will make sure of it! Stay out of my way, old man! If you want to be useful for a change, then go to Susan's house and meet with your old friend Darius Longbottom. Hopefully, the vampires on the continent won't throw in with him.

*Potter*

He proofread the message and called for his owl. "Girl, find Dumbledore and give him this. Claw him if you feel like it. Shit on him too for good measure." He attached the letter and sent her on her way.

He turned around and looked at the room full of people gaping at him and saw Emmeline had also arrived. "Emmeline, how is Bill?"

"His face is bandaged up and he says it stings a bit. Other than that, he is fine. They let him go home an hour ago. His little girlfriend is

with him.” Emmeline’s disdain was for Fleur was rather noticeable. He thought he heard a snort, probably from Molly. From what little Harry new of the situation Molly was already advising Bill on good locations for weddings.

“Did anyone get Dung’s body?” Harry asked with a somber tone. The rest of the room went silent. Harry surmised that no one had mentioned Dung getting the Dementor’s kiss.

“Damn. I forgot all about him! The muggles probably found him. I’ve just finished talking with my cousin. She says Rufus Scrimgeour wants to talk to you immediately.”

“I thought Lisa and Kevin are your cousins? Who’s Scrimgeour?”

“Wrong side of the family, my other cousins are Lavender Brown and her older brother Nicolas. Scrimgeour is the Head of Aurors. I think he is acting as Head of Law Enforcement right now. It’s probably about the Dementors last night.”

“That suits me just fine. Susan and I need to get a painting out of her Aunt’s office. Are you ready Susan?”

“Just let me finish my juice,” Susan said from over by the sink. She then proceeded to ‘chug’ the glass in a rather unladylike fashion.

“What do you know about Rufus Scrimgeour?”

“Auntie always said he was kind of abrasive, but he is good at what he does.”

“Emmeline, are you coming too? I suppose we should have someone competent from the Order. Plus you were there last night.” Harry supposed that he was getting good at having conversations in front of groups of people without really caring what they think. He was already moving in the direction of the fireplace and wondered if Mrs. Weasley caught the ‘competent’ comment.

“Sure. I can put a report in about Dung. I probably need to see Lavender. She sounded pretty upset. He destroyed Azkaban last night.”

“Yeah. Tonks said they lost a lot of aurors last night. We’ll go by floo, but let me make a pair of emergency portkeys back to here, since Susan and I still don’t know how to apparate. We need to fix that.” Harry grabbed two cork drink coasters off the table waved his wand over them and created two portkeys. He whispered the activation phrase in her ear making Susan laugh as they both looked at Hannah.

“Harry! Behave!”

“It’s her memory. Come on let’s go see Scrimgeour. Lead the way Emmeline.”

--- (Scene Break) ---

Harry Potter was not the only individual who received distressing news this morning. Lord Voldemort sat looking at reports surrounded by his Inner Circle at his round table. One of the newer recruits, who had been marked within the last month, reported that they had found Bellatrix’s body. In his anger Voldemort wandlessly banished the man across the room.

The conversation came to a standstill as the man flew through the air, impacted, and slid down the wall. Voldemort sat with a pensive look on his face before pointing to Damien Mulciber to collect the injured messenger and take him to the mediwizard. He stood and held the edges of the table with both hands.

“Bellatrix allowed herself to become sloppy and she has paid the price for her stupidity! Let her death teach you a lesson. Do not underestimate the enemy! There is a time and place for torture. The battlefield is not the place for torture. It is a place to conquer your enemy. Do not fail me because of your own petty schemes and vendettas. She allowed herself to become distracted. She was one of the best duelers among us, yet her distraction was the death of her. If you fail me in such a way, pray you die.” The temperature in the room chilled noticeably and many of the newly freed Death Eaters shifted uncomfortably in their seats. He looked at the empty seat next to him. It would be a reward to elevate one of his followers to his empty ‘hand’ position. He could see Peter eyeing the chair with a look of raw ambition.

Voldemort considered his options. 'Not today Peter. You are improving, but it is past time I reward my most faithful servant of all. I see no further need in catering to the English purebloods. Once Antonin is done seeing Penelope off, I will install him in his rightful place.'

Oddly enough, Voldemort was also angry at himself for not finishing off the metamorphagus when he had the chance. He suspected that the escaped animagus had a hand in Bellatrix's demise as well. He would miss the deviant woman's insanity, but he was more incensed at the loss of a particular valuable asset or favored pet. A long dormant memory from his youth surfaced when he and his fellow orphans had 'adopted' a three-legged dog for a short time. It took the callous adults less than one week to discover it and kill it in front of the horrified children. Young Tom Riddle was forced to dig the hole that became the grave of the dog known as 'Tripod'.

"Avery, you and Rookwood take five of the new recruits and interrogate the Podmores. I wish to know if the animagus has returned to his family. Leave at least one alive if he is not there. Peter, I require updates from our sources in the ministry. I wish to know what they are planning. There was already a Wizengamot meeting scheduled for today. Find out if the time has been changed. Our representatives in the legislature will continue to stall their attempts to appoint an interim minister. Lucius, I leave this in your capable hands. Nominate Horatio Caruthers from our side. Have others nominate that fool Diggory, as well as William Parker and Ravi Patil. Multiple candidates will split the opposition's loyalties and make a majority much less likely. I expect that there will be no new Minister of Magic this week. Parkinson, Nott, Crabbe, you will take five of the new recruits to meet with the vampire delegation from the continent tomorrow night. Nott will handle the negotiations. Explain to them the folly of rejecting my generous offer to join my ranks. McNair, you will accompany me while we extend our hand in friendship to Greyback's kinsmen. Select three of the new recruits and Madame Faircloth. I wish to see if she still possesses any of her former political savvy. If she mentions Fudge and his family, remind her that the best revenge requires proper planning."

He left the table and went to the small bar in the corner of the room. It was a bit early for Scotch, but he poured himself a drink and watched as his minions broke into smaller groups. Dolohov entered the chamber and walked to him stopping precisely two meters in front of him and executing a bow.

"Milord, she is off to seek either the curse breaker or the joke shop owners. I expect she will be in position by this evening, tomorrow at the latest."

Voldemort dropped his voice to a whisper. "Excellent old friend. Bellatrix is no more and I am in need of a new 'hand'. I see no need to further ingratiate myself to the English purebloods. My conquest will eventually spread to the continent and beyond. It is time to put on a more global face to my organization. Send out some feelers to our former associates in what remains of Christobal's old organization and into Eastern Europe. I believe there may be a friendly ear there. We have an influx of recruits, but I expect them to be a poorly trained lot. I charge you with training them into a serviceable force. Use Parkinson and Mulciber as your assistants. Lucius will handle the operation of our headquarters and affairs of politics here in England. Others will gather the creatures of the dark to me. You, my friend, will bring the ambitious Wizards and Witches of Europe into my service. Who is the new headmaster at Durmstrang?"

"Yuri Krum. Gregor Voorhees is our man there. He has been elevated to Deputy Headmaster. Do you wish for Krum to be eliminated?"

"No. Not yet. Do make sure that Igor's body will be found by his former students when their term begins. It will serve as a forceful reminder that my will extends beyond the British Isles. Have Voorhees continue his recruiting efforts and increase his funding accordingly. It would also do for us to begin to send a few people to the Americas. They can use the excuse that they are fleeing the storm brewing here. We could use a person on staff at New Salem and several of the smaller schools."

"I will begin evaluating candidates for work abroad."

"When Penelope is successful, we should send her to the States. Your grandchild should be born in relative safety. I have grown rather

fond of Penelope during your recent incarceration. You should know that she was a constant advocate of arranging your release.”

“She is also quite gifted at ancient runes and charms. Perhaps an apprenticeship in New Salem could be arranged, or a teaching position at one of the others.”

“Yes, a splendid idea. Arrange it.”

The two of them continued to discuss the international aspects of Lord Voldemort’s campaign. They debated the relative weakness of the German ministry versus conquering the French Ministry as a potential next target. The other topic was if it would be worth the effort to influence the elections next year in Spain and Portugal. Bloodless victories did not get the blood flowing in the troops quite as much, but their importance could not be diminished. The sound of a small argument interrupted their hushed conversation.

“See I told you nothing ever changes. Same old Wormtail!” The boastful voice of Walden McNair shouted with his crooked teeth grinning and an eye patch over his damaged socket. Voldemort planned to make the gift of Alastor Moody’s eye sometime tomorrow. It was ironic that Peter had been detailed to locate the vision specialist to adjust the eye to Walden. Peter simply glowered back at the large man.

“So, little rat. Are there clean linens in my room? Did you remember to leave a mint on the pillow? I need a wake up promptly at 7 AM,” McNair continued. Several of the others laughed. Rookwood was laughing so hard that he was gasping for breath. Voldemort was interested to see what Peter’s books had taught him about confrontation.

Peter looked up. Everyone assumed the redness on his face was from embarrassment and not from anger. They were all wrong.

“What kind of wizard are you, McNair? Who names their child Walden to begin with? A mother who does not expect her child to go far? Perhaps a father who realized he did not pull out quick enough? I digress. I do recall you being outsmarted by a hippogriff recently. True, it did have the unfair advantage of being chained to a post at

the time. What kind of wizard uses an axe of all things to kill something? Are you that magically feeble? I would go so far as to guess that you were the weak link at the ministry. Which one of the children incapacitated you? Probably the weakest among them.”

The room was utterly quiet for a moment as the two stared at each other. Voldemort allowed a thin smile at the looks of shock from his inner circle. The silence ended with both men going for their wands. Peter’s draw was flawless. Walden’s in contrast was rusty.

The former Executioner of Dangerous Creatures appeared to be attempting a banishing spell with four wand movements. Peter’s spell was much simpler, two slashing wand movements and a powerful incantation.

*“Crucio!”*

The spell blasted McNair backwards into the wall, where he collapsed in a screaming heap. Pettigrew advanced on Walden McNair. His eyes glowed with a savage anger. Voldemort took a moment to analyze the magic he felt from his silver-handed attendant. The magic was sub par, but the intent was clearly compensating for it. Neither man would be considered a superb dueler. McNair was simply a thug and Peter, well he was rapidly becoming harder to describe.

“Scream like a stuck pig, you worthless piece of trash. You aren’t fit to serve in the Master’s inner circle. I would be doing our side and the bloodlines a favor by removing you from it. Squirm! Yes, that’s it, squirm, you pathetic dog.”

He released McNair after thirty seconds. He leveled his wand at the large man sprawled on the ground before him.

“Sorry I don’t have an axe, Walden. Guess I’ll do this the old fashioned way. Avada ...”

“Peter!” Voldemort’s voice cut through the air stopping the pudgy wizard mid-incantation. “I didn’t go to all the trouble to liberate Walden and the rest just to have you kill him on his first day back. At least give him a week before you dispose of him. I do need him for my mission to the werewolves.”

“As you wish Master.” Peter said with a resigned voice. “I’ll let him live this time.”

--- (Scene Break) ---

Harry emerged into Auror Headquarters. He was surprised to see two aurors on station with wands trained at the floo entrance and by extension him. Emmeline was already at the counter conversing with Lavender Brown. Harry thought Lavender looked a bit worse for wear. He approached the counter and was followed by Susan. For the second time, Harry noted that he needed to question her on how she manages to keep herself so clean when coming out of the floo.

“Harry, it’s good to see you.” The blonde girl said.

“Wish it was under better circumstances, Lav.”

“Me too. I’d rather be trading gossip over an ice cream. I will let Director Scrimgeour know that you are here.” She said looking at Harry and then Susan. She stopped at Susan smiled and arched an eyebrow, before turning and heading towards the offices. Harry accepted the visitor badge one of the desk workers offered and pinned it to his shirt.

A minute later Lavender returned and led them back to the Director’s office. She showed them in and left seconds after. Harry had never met Rufus Scrimgeour, so he took a moment to regard the man. He was rather imposing and carried himself with an air of superiority.

“Mr. Potter, Ms. Bones, Thank you for coming so promptly. May I see your wands please?” Harry thought it was an odd request, but complied.

He watched as the Acting Head of Magical Law Enforcement waved his wand over the pair of wands in front of him and then poured a potion onto two rags and instructed them to polish their wands. Harry was at least comforted by the fact that Susan and Emmeline looked as confused as he did.

“Under normal circumstances, the enchantments on your wands disappear when you come of age. Due to your emancipation, you



need to have it manually removed. Every spell you have used since yesterday was still being recorded by Madame Hopkirk's office." He handed them both copies of the parchment detailing their activities.

"As you can well imagine Mr. Potter, I have questions to ask you. I am curious to know your reasons for using two of the three Unforgivables?"

Harry paused for a minute hearing Emmeline surprised gasp. "Sir, in the middle of fighting the dementors, we encountered a group of vampires. My actions were legal under the Dark Creatures Act of 1903."

"What proof can you offer?"

"Will a pensieve memory suffice?"

"It will do for a starters. Then I would like to discuss the two magnitude level five spells you cast, which our equipment could not identify." Harry wasn't exactly sure what a magnitude level five spell was. He reckoned it must be his new patronus. Emmeline must have had some clue as she looked at Harry and shook her head.

Harry found it unusual for the Director to be calmly standing there and having not confiscated his wand or anything after informing him that they detected his use of Unforgivables. Scrimgeour was a practiced law enforcement agent and an aspiring politician. He could read the thoughts on Harry's face as clearly as if the teenager had spoken them aloud.

"There are six aurors prepared to attack you if you leave this room without me giving the all clear signal. It would be best if you also made no threatening gestures right now. I am also confident that Susan would have nothing to do with a craven killer. Your aunt spoke very highly of you, Miss Bones. Also the variety of spells you used including medical spells, the patronus charm as well as combat spells allowed me to be more willing to hear your explanation rather than subdue you the moment you came out of the floo." Clearly, Rufus Scrimgeour was no fool!

Harry provided the memory of the encounter in front of the cinema. He terminated the memory at the point they were left with the vampire. Harry did not want to compromise Coedus's location until he had a better feel for the Chief Auror. Rufus gestured for Harry to enter the pensieve first. Both Susan and Emmeline followed Rufus into the large basin.

For the next few minutes they watched Harry first drive off the Dementors and turn to face the vampires. It was the first time Harry had watched himself literally in action. He watched himself with a critical eye, looking for flaws in his form and finding nothing other than he leads with his right side slightly.

Susan watched Harry in combat. The only other time she had seen him was in her house, which was still. She still hadn't held him to his promise to show the rest of his adventures. When the others had arrived, she could never get him alone and she had been too afraid to push him further on the matter. Honestly, she worried that if she did, it would have driven him towards Ginny Weasley.

Simply put, Harry was incredible. Aunt Amelia had occasionally let her watch the auror trainees duel. His movements were swift and efficient. There were no wasted movements. She flinched when the one vampire's blow knocked Harry backwards. She caught her breath as Harry bounced onto the street. She watched the vampire decide between the two injured wizards and turn towards Bill. Without hesitation Harry cast the killing curse and felled the vampire. She saw herself and Emmeline arrive. It had not occurred to her at the time exactly how much pain Harry was in at that moment. Emmeline apparated Bill away. Susan spared a glance at Ms. Vance and saw a thoughtful expression on her face.

The scene played out much the way Susan remembered. She saw that Harry was watching the memory of Susan and her reaction to his actions. He turned and looked at her with an apologetic look. She answered with her very best brave smile. Scrimgeour was busy watching the interrogation, but did note the nonverbal exchange between the two teenagers. The memory faded and everyone exited the pensieve.

“Well Mr. Potter, I do believe that answers the use of the Unforgiveables. I recommend that this does not become public knowledge. Like it or not you are currently being painted as the savior. The world needs a hero right now and one that would not use those types of spells. The public is fickle. Madame Hopkirk is under strict orders to ensure that any record of this is destroyed.”

“I did spend last year as an ‘attention seeking glory hound’ according to the papers. Then suddenly, I am a lone voice of truth in a dark time. The remaining vampire gave me information about a Death Eater meeting tomorrow night.”

“Good work on those vampires. I’ve heard a rumor here or there that you want to join the force when you leave school. After seeing you in action, I doubt that will be a problem. Where is the vampire now?”

“Safe, for the moment. I have someone keeping an eye on him as we speak. He claims to be an acquaintance of Dumbledore. I have informed him about it. He showed me his registration tattoo – DCV0016. You should have him on file.”

“Where is the meeting going to take place?”

Harry answered Rufus and then provided the memory of him casting the Dementor killing patronus. He started the memory as he was walking away from the car with the kissed baby in it. It was here that Harry noticed that he had wandlessly summoned his Firebolt. This time no one missed it. It was very disorienting following the Harry in the memory as he flew across the streets to attack the hovering Dementors. It generated a feeling of vertigo that made everyone slightly nauseous, akin to a muggle amusement park attraction. The group watched the Harry cast the spell using no wand movements or visible incantation. As he cast the spell there was the same distortion effect around Harry that he had sensed earlier. The solid patronus thundered across the pavement and gored the Dementor. Scrimgeour watched in fascination as something thought impossible occurred, a Dementor was slain. The memory continued as they watched Harry hug the patronus before it disappeared and finally the failed attempt to save Fletcher’s life along with the second killer patronus. Harry

noticed how badly he staggered after casting the patronus for the second time.

Scrimgeour considered all this. The vampires would be a bit wary of joining Voldemort and the Dementors may be wishing that they had not joined the Dark Lord. Now he realized why the soul suckers had suddenly retreated into the night. The moment he learned that they had abandoned Azkaban, Rufus feared the size of the body count. It had been significantly less than any of the Arithmatical estimates given by the Ministry's disaster preparation team. He now knew the reason why. The Dementors were afraid of Harry Potter. He turned to look at the teenager, who clearly outclassed everyone in this building in raw magical talent.

"That has to be the single most impressive bit of magic I have ever seen, Mr. Potter. It is no wonder the Dementors suddenly withdrew. The number crunchers at the Ministry said that if this ever happened, there would be two to three times the number of deaths. Do you know how to reproduce the effects and is it a spell that can be taught to someone else?"

"No sir." Harry answered somewhat dejectedly. "It takes a massive burst of power and I feel weak after doing it. No spell really came to mind, I just wanted them gone."

"Would you be able to demonstrate the spell here?"

"I am not sure. We can give it a try, but your office is too small."

"Let me give the all clear signal and we can head to a dueling pit. Even if no one else can do this, it is still significant. Most likely, the Dementors will not attack unless they have a Death Eater escort. It will make their attacks bigger in size, but more easily countered. Follow me."

The group which now included Lavender, a wizard named Jennings and a Senior Auror named Dawson headed to a dueling pit. Several others stopped what they were doing and moved to a location where they could watch. Harry stood and concentrated for a moment, trying to feel the power inside of him. He could feel the swell of power building. Deciding to cheat a little, he reduced the flow of energy to

his core shield to a trickle. The resulting shift caused his arm to buck more violently than in the memories as the stag erupted from the end of his holly wand. If possible the stag was even larger now. Prongs looked around sensing no immediate threat. It walked slowly on the elevated platform and stopped in front of the group that had gathered there. Scrimgeour climbed up and reached out to touch it. He felt the fur on its head and the heat of its breath. It was a solid creature! Others reached up from the ground and touched the closest foreleg. The patronus faded after two minutes.

The female Auror looked at the Director. "Sir, it is impressive, but I fail to see the significance."

"I watched Mr. Potter's patronus kill two Dementors last night."

"Kill?"

"Yes, kill. Not drive off, kill. How do you feel Mr. Potter?"

"Pretty worn out. Don't ask me to do that again for at least an hour or two."

"Fair enough. We should go back to my office."

"Is it possible for Susan and I to collect Madame Bones's personal effects from her office at the Ministry?"

"Very well, we can continue our discussion there. I need to go there for the Wizengamot meeting this afternoon. Come to think of it you and Miss Bones should be there as well, we have been unable to elect an interim Minister for over a week. It is vital that the public see the government is in control."

"Even if it isn't?" Harry asked looking him in the eye.

Scrimgeour returned the look before saying quietly, "Especially if it isn't."

As they walked back up to the main level, Harry could see Lavender trying to whisper to Susan on the steps. He didn't have to be close to

the conversation to see that Lavender “The Gossip Niffler” was burrowing for the veritable mother lode. Harry decided to intercede.

“Lavender, are you pestering my girlfriend?”

“Of course not Harry. Wait, did you just say girlfriend?”

“Um, I suppose I did.” He said passing her at the top of the steps and seeing a smile on Susan’s face.

“That’s great! Congratulations!” Lavender said closing her gaping mouth and regaining her composure.

“Thank you.” Susan responded with a bit of a blush on her face.

The group continued to the direct floo connection to the Ministry. Dawson returned to her duties and Lavender said her goodbyes and seemed suddenly interested in leaving. Harry received a regular ministry visitor badge, which Rufus tapped with his wand and the words “Authorized to Carry Wand” appeared on the badge. From there they traveled to the Ministry. They arrived on the fourth floor, which belonged to the various branches of Magical Law Enforcement.

As the guard at the floo was checking Emmeline’s badge, Harry leaned in close to Susan. “How many people do you think Lavender will call today?”

“At least thirty. Any particular reason, you decided to announce that to the largest gossip in Hogwarts?”

“Actually, yes. It’s been a really bad day for everyone. If some gossip about you and I takes people’s minds off things even for a few minutes, then maybe people won’t dwell so much on all the negative out there. If I had mentioned that we are engaged, we would still be back there trying to revive her.”

“I don’t see an engagement ring on my hand Mr. Presumptive.” She teased.

“We’ll stop at Gringotts on the way to the Wizengamot. I need to speak to the goblins anyway. I think there may be some very nice

jewelry in one of the vaults. I am sure we can find you something.” He fired back nonchalantly.

“Really Harry? I was just teasing you?”

“I know, but it doesn’t change anything. You still should have a ring, plus, I want to see Hannah’s face when you have it on.”

“Okay,” Susan said hesitantly. In her mind she thought, ‘Damn! He is doing it again! How can he be so casual about picking up an engagement ring?’

They passed through the checkpoint and were lead to the Amelia Bones’s office. The lettering was still on the door. Harry squeezed Susan’s hand as they got close and he saw her darkening expression. She tried to smile as they entered.

“Jennings, will you help Ms. Vance and Susan collect Amelia’s personal effects. Mr. Potter can we speak in private?”

“Susan, are you going to be okay?”

“Not really, but you should go with him anyway.”

“If you say so. Don’t hesitate to come get me if you need to.” He said following Rufus into a different office. He watched as the Director performed a more complex privacy charm then Harry was used to seeing. He made a mental note to ask to see that one again at some point in the future.

“What did you want sir?” Harry asked

“First off call me Rufus. May I call you Harry?”

“Harry’s good. I keep hearing Mr. Potter and have to remind myself not to look for some Hogwarts professor calling me.”

“I will cut to the chase. How close are you to Dumbledore? Everything I had heard up to this point led me to believe that you were Dumbledore’s man through and through.”

“Two weeks ago, you were probably right. A month ago, you were definitely right. Now, I am Harry son of James and Lily. I am my own man and I intend to remain that way.”

“Well spoken. I heard rumors of tension between the two of you. I wanted to confirm them before I asked anything else from you.”

“What is it you want from me?”

“You have a voice in our government now and you are riding a crest of popular opinion. Combine the two and I believe your choice could determine who becomes the next Minister of Magic.”

“I guess you would like to be the next Minister.”

“I realized this morning that if this war is to be fought. The leaders should want to win. They should be warriors and not politicians.”

“Let me see your bare arms.” Harry asked knowing it was a social taboo in Wizarding culture, but then again so was using Unforgivables.

Rufus did not hesitate and removed his shirt baring both arms for inspection. Harry reached out and touched both arms in the spot where Voldemort marks his victims. He felt nothing from his scar.

“You’re not a Death Eater.”

“Polyjuice or a glamour spell could cover it.”

“Not from me. My scar connects me to the bastard. I can feel the mark on someone else, if I am in direct physical contact. I learned that lesson after Crouch Junior. Dumbledore had me prove it on Snape before the term ended.”

For a brief moment Scrimgeour toyed with the idea of having Harry validate every one in the Ministry as a Dark Mark detector, but discarded it. Perhaps later a screening of his senior staff would be in order.



“Ah yes. The spy. I recall he was with you at the Bones attack. Or at least that is the story that was given?”

“I do believe that is what the record shows.” Harry replied with a voice laden with innuendo.

“As I suspected. I am sure the old man appreciated you not turning in his pet redemption project.”

“Not as much as you would think. What do you think of Werewolves, Goblins, Vampires, Centaurs, House Elves and any other race I left out?”

“Lycanthropy is an affliction and is controllable. Vampirism is a state and as such can be contained but never completely controlled. Centaurs will fight only on their terms and most likely for neither side. House Elves are a servant race, who do not really desire their freedom. Goblins are a servant race, who greatly desire their freedom. Unless steps are taken, the victor in this war will face a Goblin revolt within five years in all likelihood. Giants are a dying race, who will probably not go quietly into the night. Trolls are grunts, whose services will be purchased by both sides. Let's see who am I missing? Merfolk! They could care less unless their domain is threatened.”

“Do you think any can be brought to our side?”

“Werewolves don't exist in a formal government and must be treated as individuals and small packs. Unfortunately, they have been rather poorly treated because of their monthly affliction. Some could be convinced, some will take no sides and most will join the Dark Lord for the promise of revenge and a few galleons to rub together. The best we can hope for from the Vampires of Europe is that they stay neutral and remain outside the conflict. Merfolk and the Centaurs picture themselves superior to our squabbles and it would take a direct threat to their domains to make them tilt either way. The only real question mark is the Goblins, who ironically hold everyone's purse strings. They would demand concessions for their support. Most likely more than our people would be willing to give. So the most direct answer to your question is no.”

“Okay, I accept your reasoning. I still believe some overtures and concessions would be useful in keeping them from the other side. How do you propose fighting this war?”

“Conscription and mobilization of wizards and witches between the age of 18 and 35. A self defense force of over 3000 in that age group. Though some will flee and others will find various ways of avoiding service.”

“I seem to recall something from History of Magic about the Vatican Accords of 1575, where the ministries of Europe negotiated a truce with the Catholic Church and part of that was that there would be no magical armies?”

“It appears the Dark Lord was not a signatory. He appears to be gathering an army. We will have a self defense force. I believe in the muggle world they would be called the National Guard or the Reserves. It would not be an army and would not be allowed to operate outside of England.”

“I don’t know if I like it, but it is the first idea I’ve heard that sounds like it could work. How do you stop the Death Eaters from infiltrating your self defense force? How do you plan to pay for it all?”

“Initial physicals and random checks for conscripts. For the money part, well have you ever seen a government that tried to fight a war on a budget that won? We’ll find the money. With an average cost of 6000 galleons per person it would run close to 20 million per year to field and equip this force. How much money do you have in your vaults, Harry? How much would you be willing to give to stop him?”

“Money’s never mattered to me before. I will be glad to contribute, as long as I can see some results. You’ll need to be able to fund this for at least a couple of years. If we haven’t destroyed him in two years, my guess is that there won’t be a Wizarding Britain left to fight for, but I don’t want to bankroll your entire force. Some others will need to step forward and do their share. Let them know you have a portion of the funding, but not all. Hell, you can let Death Eaters buy exemptions for their little Death Nibblers emptying his coffers and giving you more money.”

“That could work. Though it would seem that the poor and Muggleborn would carry the burden. There could be backlash against the wealthy. Can I count on your support?”

“In for a Knut, in for a Galleon. Once again a month ago, I wouldn’t have even considered your offer. Now, I’ll take all the help I can get. My support is contingent on one thing.”

“What is that?”

“Everyone gets a trial. None of this Barty Crouch shit again where people are just sent to Azkaban or whatever replaces it unless they are already previously convicted.”

“I can agree to that.” He held out his hand.

“Count me in Rufus.” Harry clasped and shook, hoping he was doing the right thing.

## Chapter 14 – Light in the Shadow of the Wulf

Albus Dumbledore was feeling his age today. The past day had not gone very well at all. Harry Potter was becoming increasingly estranged and he feared what the young wizard would learn from his relatives. The rift in their relationship had now reached canyon proportions. Immediately after the will reading and dealing with a group of irate goblins, he had to portkey to Geneva to meet with a small group of wizards and witches that had supported him against Grindlewald and at least passively against Voldemort the first time. The meeting was heated and several whose support he was certain of remained noncommittal. The results were not encouraging. He cursed the fact that he was so preoccupied trying to keep the government from falling apart to devote time to keeping Harry from slipping further and further away.

To make matters worse, he was informed that Voldemort had chosen last night to raze Azkaban. Searching his mind, he recalled Severus was in the room when he announced that he would not be in the country during either the last Order meeting. It seemed terribly convenient. He had just sent Poppy to tend to young Nymphadora and received the disturbing news that both Kingsley and Alastor had fallen. They were proud, noble men and their deaths were a stinging blow to those that remained. The only bright side was learning that Sturgis was free and safe.

“Albus, what do you intend to do about Mr. Potter?”

“I am at a loss, Minerva. He chafes under any restrictions. Legally, he is an adult now. Poppy informed me that he and William were injured last night while fighting vampires and Dementors. His injuries were minor. William’s were a bit more severe. Poppy tried checking with some of her friends at the hospital, but they were too busy at the time. Mr. Fletcher fell to a Dementor’s kiss.”

“Should I approach him? It will be another week before we can open Hogwarts early and move everyone out of Headquarters.”

“Yes. Perhaps that would be best. You need to distance yourself from me in your conversations with him. I did mention to him that I would ask you to assist him in becoming an animagus. If you feel it to be

your advantage, you might wish to say that you recommended it previously, but was denied. I suspect he may not wish to leave his house and come here. We will have to fight that battle when it comes.”

“Why would I distance myself from you, Albus?”

“He will treat anyone and anything connected with me with suspicion for the foreseeable future. You were not at the will reading. Our discussion ended just short of a duel. His anger bled over onto Ms. Granger and Ms. Weasley. He colors them with the same brush he currently paints me with. He also seems to have become rather attached to Susan Bones, since he rescued her from Tom. What is your opinion of her?”

“Quite frankly, I don’t have one. She has been an above average student. She shows flashes of promise, but otherwise she has not made an impression on me. Her marks are good.”

“Harry is now aware of his End-of-Line clauses. From speaking with Peter Abbott, Susan also has a marriage clause in effect. We should observe what effect Susan has on Harry. At least some good can come of his emancipation. The additional votes coupled with Narcissa’s divorce temporarily nullifying the Malfoy vote may allow us to break the stalemate and appoint an interim Minister for the rest of Cornelius’s term.”

“I take it that Harry is no longer interested in the youngest Weasley? I had thought the life debt would increase the attraction.”

“Yes, but apparently Ms. Bones has also become indebted to Harry as well. He has a knack for acquiring life debts. It would be tempting to separate them, but she is also an adult now. I have no leverage to apply. Offering him the Prefect position would mean taking it from Mr. Weasley. He will expect me to rescind his ban on quidditch. You could appoint him captain, but that may be a slight against Ms. Bell. Peter mentioned that his daughter Hannah may hold some sway over Susan. Perhaps there is an avenue to explore there, but I doubt it. For now I think it best for you to approach him.”

The two continued to sip their morning tea in silence. Each pondered how far the relationship between the Headmaster and Harry Potter has deteriorated. The transfiguration professor figured it had been inevitable from the years of neglect Harry had suffered followed by the difficulties of the last year. Delores Umbridge had made it her personal mission to replace Severus as the teacher Harry Potter was most likely to physically attack. Minerva jokingly told her superior that last fact.

"I am becoming more and more concerned about Severus' behavior. He participated in the attack on Amelia. When I questioned him about it, he simply stated that Tom was running low on capable fighters and ordered him. When coupled with the fact that Azkaban was attacked when I was out of the country, it calls his actions further in to question. Very few people knew that I was to be gone last night. I have asked Charles Vector to consider taking over as head of Slytherin house. What are your thoughts?"

"Charles would do a fine job. He is a consummate professional. I notice you have been sending him out to meet Muggleborn parents. Won't Severus be suspicious?" She asked intrigued that Dumbledore's faith in Severus Snape was failing.

"He will be suspicious, but I believe I can allay his fears. Between his responsibilities in the classroom, the Order and of course whatever Tom may have him doing, he is a very busy individual. I can offer to relieve him of added responsibilities of being Head of House."

"But won't we lose our ability to keep tabs on the students in that house?"

"Between Charles, the paintings, and the house elves, it should more than compensate for that. I have been reviewing Severus' reports on his charges. Taken individually, they appear fine. I have taken the liberty of reviewing the entire last two years as a body of work this morning and have come to the realization that he is not really telling us anything we could not already surmise. In fact he concentrates on some students and ignores others. There are several instances where he fixates on Millicent Bulstrode as a potential recruit who may already be marked. She suffered a sprained shoulder during the

unfortunate events in Madame Umbridge's office at the end of last year. Poppy examined her and found no evidence of the Dark Mark. She informed me upon my return and I interviewed Ms. Bulstrode. She intends to become a healer. I asked if she would like to experience an in-depth magical core analysis used by healers for advanced diagnostics. She readily agreed. The results finally came back last week and Poppy reported that the analysis showed a rather pristine core, with very little exposure to the dark arts. Interestingly enough, the last two years make almost no mention of Theodore Nott, Adrian Pucey or Melissa Caruthers at all."

"Doubtless if you ask him directly, he will have a convenient and rational excuse for you."

"Indeed. Yet two of the three are children of known Death Eaters and the sympathies of the Caruthers family are well documented. I have asked Charles to keep them under surveillance when the term starts."

"Returning to my house, the one thing Potter showed an interest in last year was becoming an auror. If his scores do not qualify him, you could offer an alternative." Minerva offered.

"That is a possibility. Ah, here comes Harry's owl. Perhaps this is good news." Dumbledore said reaching for the letter attached to the leg of the snowy owl. Once the letter was removed, the bird hopped onto his shoulder. "I have always said that she is such a beautiful and well behaved owl." The owl stayed on his shoulder for a moment and then flew away.

As he opened the letter and began to read his expression soured. "It appears Harry is even more upset with me than I originally believed."

"Obviously Albus. You need look no further than your shoulder."

Dumbledore looked at the 'gift' the snowy owl left behind. "I see what you mean."

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"Glad to have you onboard, Harry." Rufus Scrimgeour smiled.

"I do need a few favors however." Harry replied.

"Such as?"

"First I need someone I can trust as a trainer and a bodyguard."

"Who do you have in mind?"

"Tonks."

"I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news. She is missing and presumed dead at the moment. Perhaps someone else?"

"She's injured, but safe at the moment. Not missing, but she is in no condition to resume working at the moment."

"That is good news, but why isn't she at St. Mungo's?"

"Voldemort has frozen her in her present form. It would not be in her best interest to be scene in public until she has solved her problem."

Rufus raised an eyebrow at the young man in front of him. "Who does she look like? More importantly, if you want me to assign her to you, she will be useless as a bodyguard. Why not choose someone else?"

"She looks like a younger version of her deceased Aunt Bellatrix. To answer your second question, when I became head of the Black family, her welfare became part of my responsibility."

"Understandable. Not to offend, but without her unique talents she is only another warm body. We are short on those right now. Her dueling skills are average, but if you want her she is yours. What else?"

"Drop the age restriction on use of magic. Even the kids should have a chance to practice to defend themselves."

"That one will probably meet a bit of resistance. I don't think we can sell the Wizengamot on dropping it completely. As a counter offer, we lower it to fourteen provided the child has completed their third year? Do you really expect a second year to try and fight a Death Eater?"



“Not particularly. That said, if you eliminate it then you can pretty much reassign the majority of Madame Hopkirk’s staff and budget. Simply lowering it may force her to ask for more staff and money.”

“Clever. I like the way you are thinking. How about a decree suspending it for the rest of the summer with the promise of lowering it for next summer? Take most of her staff now and let her replace it next year from the intern pool.”

“Sounds fair to me. What is your opinion of Dolores Umbridge?”

“Walking, breathing, bigoted scum. A symbol of everything Fudge did wrong.”

“The more we talk, the more common ground we find. Sack her. Fire her. Have little kids follow her around and stone her for all I care, but get rid of her.”

“She’s got a lot of friends in the Ministry. As much as I hate to admit it, I don’t think I can get rid of her outright. There are several open ambassadorships. I say we send her far, far away – preferably to someone whom we never expect to receive any assistance from.”

“Seems wrong sending her away to safety, while we fight.”

“Politics is filled with what can be termed as ‘necessary evils’. It is just part of the game. Dueling is far easier. In politics you must be careful of your enemies and how you treat them. You may need them to be your allies on the next vote.”

“Must be why Dumbledore is so good at it. Too bad he is fighting the war like it is a political fight.” Scrimgeour openly laughed at Harry’s assessment.

“Politics will age you prematurely and corrupt your values. You would do well to stay as far away as you can from it. This of course will be rather difficult for you. Do you have any idea how many votes your line carries?”

“The Potter line has six. The Blacks have three and I was told that I can claim the two Lestrage votes. Dumbledore was supposed to file the paperwork for that.”

“Narcissa Malfoy will fight you on that. You may be head of the titled head of the Black family, but she has blood on her side. She will probably defeat your claim and retain those two votes.”

“She was the one who advised me to claim them. Mind you this was right after I dissolved her marriage and she left the country, quite pleased with herself as I recall.”

Rufus allowed himself a moment of shock. The news that Narcissa had taken herself off the political landscape was big, huge in fact. Though Lucius is now free, there would be no eligible members of that family to vote the eleven votes they possess. No doubt one of Lucius Malfoy’s cousins would claim the votes, but only after they filed the paperwork. The likelihood of appointing a Minister suddenly went from a hope to a probability in less than ten seconds. Voldemort may have won a battle at Azkaban, but a victory in the Wizengamot will soften the blow.

“Does anyone else know about this?”

“Only those at the will reading. She was gone from the country within the hour. I don’t think anyone sent Lucius a memo.” Scrimgeour grin widened. By birth he was a half blood and he was never claimed by the Pure Blooded Carrows family, who were his closest magical cousins, not that he wanted anything to do with those Death Eaters in noblemen’s clothing. His lack of a lineage had created a glass ceiling that with Harry Potter’s help, he was about to shatter.

“I think that there will be a new minister by the end of the day. If all goes well, it will be me. I think we are done here Harry. I would ask that you meet me in the atrium thirty minutes before the meeting. The ushers will show you to your box. With your permission I would sit there with you?”

“Why do you want to sit with me?”

“I am a half blood with no real lineage. I have no votes of my own.”

“When I return to school, what happens to my votes?”

“You can appoint a representative. Typically the professional vultures, ahem politicians will offer substantial gifts to add your votes to their block. You can easily increase your fortune or acquire some choice properties with the amount of political muscle you wield at the moment.”

“Any restrictions on the individual I appoint?”

“No squibs, werewolves, vampires or other cursed individuals. I won’t be able to do it, if I indeed become Minister, but I can find you someone trustworthy.”

“Maybe, but I have an idea.” Harry said channeling his inner-Slytherin.

Rufus Scrimgeour asked Harry to explain and after two more minutes of explanations and at least one very loud exclamation that tested the strength of the privacy charm, both wizards left the office to rejoin the group in the adjoining office collecting the personnel effects of Amelia Bones.

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Harry and Susan walked into the doors of Gringotts. Emmeline apparated away, delivering the boxes and the painting of Edgar Bones back to number twelve. Harry promised Susan an update as soon as they were safe from prying eyes and ear. Harry approached the nearest goblin teller, who regarded him with a sneer.

“Good day, I wish to see Cleftskull and Scarmaker.”

“I am not a Djinn, wish for something else youngling.” The goblin replied dismissively sorting parchment.

“Perhaps I should clarify my request. You will tell Cleftskull and Scarmaker that Harry Potter, head of the Potter and Black families is here and will speak with them directly.” Harry said flashing the two family rings he wore. Harry had tried the carrot approach. Rufus suggested the stick. In this instance Rufus was correct. The goblin

shrank backwards rather noticeably and immediately scurried towards the back offices.

“A bit heavy handed there, Lord Harry Potter?” Susan said with a teasing smile. Inside she was impressed however, sometimes Harry positively radiated authority.

“Both of them are very senior goblins. Scrimgeour said I would have to be firm when dealing with the goblins. I had hoped not to get all Malfoyish, but if it’s going to save us time we barely have and get things moving then I will do what needs doing.”

“Oh and here I thought you were doing this to impress me?”

“If you aren’t impressed with me by now, there’s not much else I think I can do.”

“Well you did hold the door for me on the way in, so I suppose that counts for something. It’s not impressive like transfiguring a cat into a dragon, but I guess I’ll lower my standards.”

“Well I seem to have acquired a knack for changing Molly Weasley into an ass. Does that count?”

That hit a sore spot with Susan. She was fairly close to screaming at the woman this morning over the things she was saying to Harry. Hannah had told Susan after she had gotten out of the shower that Harry had taken Tonks into his room and was talking to the distraught woman. The people downstairs were saying that she was stuck looking like Bellatrix Lestrange. This apparently greatly upset Neville. Hannah visibly flinched when they walked by the library. Hannah said she had felt pure rage from the Gryffindor. She said she would try and calm him down after they left. Susan had a couple of choice words for her best friend upon learning that she had been interrogating her fiancé this morning.

“Hmmm. I don’t know about that. I think that is something she does more to herself. Do you think Tonks will be okay?”

"It's going to take a great deal of time. I got Rufus to assign her as a bodyguard and tutor for me. She is going to start training me. I am sure she'll teach you as well."

"That's great! Should I be concerned about the number of eligible young women that have been seen entering your bedroom lately?"

"Chelsea is obviously a handful and Remus would be on me about Tonks. Though Hannah did admit to her crush on me. I think Justin would understand." Harry said receiving a light smack on the arm.

"No, I definitely think he would not understand. Further, I would have to hunt my best friend down."

"Well then I guess I am stuck with you then."

"Like a permanent sticking charm I am afraid."

"Good day Mr. Potter." A goblin said interrupting their flirtations. Harry turned to see Cleftskull and a second goblin, who must be Scarmaker.

"Greetings and thank you for seeing me on such short notice."

"Have you come to sort through your financial affairs?"

"Not particularly. I would like to visit my vaults to search for something for Susan, but I would like to speak with the two of you on a delicate matter."

Both the goblins looked interested and led Harry and Susan into Cleftskull's office. They moved several stones with runes carved on them around the room and declared that the room was secure.

"Now what can Gringotts do for you today, Lord Potter." Cleftskull said. Harry noted that Scarmaker appeared to be deferring to the head of wills and inheritances.

"The Wizengamot is meeting today. I am told that when I return to school that I will need to appoint a representative to vote when I cannot."

“Yes that is your kind’s way. You will be approached by several voting blocks. They will offer gifts, goods and services for the right to represent yourself and Lady Bones.”

“Yes, but I am not interested in having a wizard or witch represent me.”

“Your kind has laws that prevent non-magical humans or ones with various conditions from representing their families.”

“I am aware, but is there a law that prevents me from having a goblin represent me?” Harry was pleasantly surprised by the stunned look on everyone else in the room.

Scarmaker recovered first. “You would do this?”

“I trust you with my money. Is it not logical to trust you with my voice?”

Cleftskull rejoined the conversation. “Such is unheard of. It has never been done before, but there are no laws preventing it. From my understanding, house elves bearing their owner’s family rings have upon occasion delivered votes when their owner’s were otherwise unable to come. A goblin wearing a wizard family ring would cause a considerable bit of chaos. It is audacious and for that alone I applaud you. What do you seek to accomplish by this action?”

“Do you prefer the short term or long term answer?”

“Both.”

“In the short term it will surprise my enemies. It will hopefully improve my standing amongst your people. These same people that were willing to shower me with gifts to curry my favor will now need to negotiate with a cunning goblin instead of a naïve Hogwarts student. You will be able to use my votes to advance issues important to your people. In the long term, I hope to avoid yet another uprising. This war is about to escalate and whoever wins will have to deal with the goblins.”

“Very clever, Lord Potter. You offer the goblin clans a voice in the wizarding government. Something our gold can only rent for a short time. I will need to confer with the elders. If we agree, whom do you wish to represent you?” Cleftskull asked.

“You.”

“Not your account manager?”

“He defers to you. From what I can tell, you hold a higher position amongst your people. Besides Scarmaker, will be managing my accounts and they will increase under his direct care. By nature of your position, you are used to dealing with the arrogance of my people and will be more effective.” Harry was careful not to slight Scarmaker while flattering Cleftskull.

“Very clever indeed and well thought out. Yes, my position is superior. You will receive a greater acclaim amongst the clans as a result. When do you wish an answer?”

“How soon will you know?”

“Within the hour the elders will have an answer.”

“Then Susan and I will go to the vaults and return in an hour. I thank you for your time.” Harry said nodding to each in turn, before turning to Susan. “Shall we?”

Harry noticed that Susan was very quiet on the way to the carts. He could tell she was practically bursting to ask him questions. He helped her into the cart and climbed in before the attendant sent the cart hurtling forward at breakneck speed. They held onto each other during the trip, partly for comfort and partly for safety. They arrived at vault number 19, the Potter family vault. Harry hopped out of the cart and waited for Susan. The goblin instructed him to press his family ring onto the seal. Harry had hoped for something impressive like a dragon guarding his vault, it seemed rather mundane.

Both Harry and Susan were amazed at the piles of gold stacked around the vault. It was easily as big as the Gryffindor common room. Along one wall were paintings all snoozing quietly, none of whom

Harry recognized. Harry decided he would come back and speak with the paintings to learn about his heritage at some point. There were some other heirlooms, ornate furniture, even a pair of what could only be magic carpets and in the center a case containing jewelry. Harry led Susan over to the case.

“Harry, we don’t have to do this right now?” She said in a slightly scared voice.

“Don’t you want to? We have a whole hour to kill.” He asked noting her trembling. His joke had failed to lighten the seriousness on her face.

“Yes. But I want it to be because you want to?”

“Susan, it’s probably the one thing that I am completely fine with at the moment. I told Hannah this morning that if you had to pick someone out of her house who most resembled Helga’s ideals, it would be you. I am not keen on marrying anyone and dragging her into my life, but I am required to do it. In short, I choose you. I’ve fought beside you and I’ve laughed with you. It’s more than enough for me.”

Susan was close to collapsing into a blubbing mess again. “If I didn’t have to get married to, would you still choose me?”

“We never really spoke that much at school. Without the benefit of getting to really know you, I don’t know. But I do know you now. That’s what is important. If it would bring back your family, then I would gladly have this conversation with Cho, Ginny or someone else – well not Pansy. However, I stopped dealing in ‘what ifs’ along time ago. Here and now, you are the best girl for me. So do you want to pick out a ring?”

Sure enough, Susan was a blubbing mess for the next few minutes. Harry reasoned it was a good blubbing mess and not a bad one. He simply held her in her arms while she cried and said incoherent things into his shoulder. He must have really done something very right or very wrong. She had Cho Chang style waterworks going on now. After a couple of minutes he decided to start nuzzling her neck. She seemed to like that. Hell, he liked it too! After a couple of seconds,



the crying slowed and she started kissing him back rather forcefully. A minute passed by before they moved over to a couch in the corner. Her tears had stopped and there was a hungry look in her eyes. They spent the next ten minutes with their hands and lips exploring each other in ways previously only imagined, before they stopped with robes off and clothing in complete disarray. Susan was the only one with a shirt still on, barely. His hands had simply bypassed the clothing and worked their way under them. They had stopped when Harry started tugging at her skirt and Susan whispered "Not here. Not now." There was no rejection in her eyes, simply a request for a delay and a change of venue. Harry fought to control himself. He focused on his emotional control. After straightening their garments and putting them back on in some cases. They sat for a minute.

"That was intense." Susan said still breathing heavily and fanning herself with one hand.

"You can say that again. I was starting to lose control." Harry admitted.

"Your heir compulsion might be starting to kick in already."

"After only a day? Isn't that a bit unusual?"

"Says the wizard who recently started killing Dementors. You are right though. We're probably just being a bit randy. We haven't really had much in the way of privacy."

"You said that you and Hannah researched these clauses. What do you know about it?"

"In a way its like an Imperius curse only enchanted into your ring. You'll really enjoy things like what we were just doing. You'll feel motivated to seek out a long term partner."

"Probably the nicest bit of magic I've encountered so far." He said earning him a playful smack.

"Your magic will start kicking in as well, subtle changes in your aura to make you more attractive, not that you need much help right now mind you!"

“Is it just directed at you or do I need to start watching myself around Ginny even more?”

“At first it will focus on everyone and later to a much lesser extent. It will focus on me after we ...” She trailed off blushing.

All he could say in response was “Oh”.

“Don’t worry. I’m okay with it. Believe me! I am definitely one hundred percent okay with this. They say the power of attraction is related to the power of the person under the compulsion. If I didn’t stop us now, then the goblin out there was going to have some jokes to tell his coworkers. From what I read it will also start attuning us to each other’s aura, making us more compatible. We’ll feel more attracted to each other. Again, no complaints from me. From what I read it is like a weak love potion. At the same time, being in tune like that will reduce the efficiency of contraceptive magic and potions. Muggle methods will fail completely as your magic attempts to fulfill the compulsion by actively sabotaging them. Given your relative strength, I really need to start looking for baby accessories. My guess is I’ll be pregnant before Christmas break, if not sooner. Hell if this isn’t the compulsion kicking in, then you are really in trouble when it does! I personally will not be held accountable for my actions, if you start charming me like a veela.”

“And you’re really okay with this?” He said amazed.

She smiled at him. There was very little innocence in her eyes at the moment. “Oh yeah.” To emphasize her point she licked her lips. “If we didn’t have to go to the Wizengamot today, I’d recommend going back to your house, kick everyone out and practice tuning our auras until we pass out.”

“Naughty, Susan - very naughty. Is that a promise or a threat? At least this somewhat explains my parent’s whirlwind romance, no matter what might have started it. I guess it is comforting to know that they grew even more attracted to each other. I can’t come up with any arguments against being more attracted to you. Come on we better straighten ourselves up and pick out a ring for you. If what you describe is going to happen, we should have the wedding before we leave for Hogwarts.”

“What?” Susan exclaimed. She wished he would warn her, before making such declarations.

“Remember what Hermione said. Married couples get their own quarters. Otherwise, you’ll be trying to break into the Gryffindor dorms all the time for my veela like charms. We’ll get a lot less detentions if we are in our own bed rather than a broom closet.” Harry said smiling at her. “Besides, we need more time alone – just you and me with no house full of people or goblin waiting in the cart outside. People will start to get suspicious if we have to keep coming to the bank everyday. Although there is a certain allure in trying to become members of Club One Thirty-Four.” Harry said referring to the commonly known fact that there are exactly that number of broom closets at the school. A student can claim to have joined that club if they have performed certain actions in each and every one. Lavender and Seamus was the only members Harry knew, though several of the Slytherins, Ravenclaws and more than a few Hufflepuffs were also alleged members.

“Yes ravaging me amongst all your money, such a typical male fantasy. It seems like something your best mate Malfoy would think of.” Susan said pulling on her robe and having to do a little dance to shake the coins loose that had become captured in the garment.

Harry had to laugh. It did seem like something that ‘Ferret Boy’ would find attractive. He followed her over to the case and watched as she picked through various rings. She finally chose one with a pair of small emeralds surrounding a larger ruby. She said it reminded her of his eyes and her hair. It was elegant without being gaudy. Harry made a show of placing it on her finger earning him another session, which was stopped short of returning to the couch. Before closing the case Harry managed to sneak a pair of emerald earrings into his pocket as a gift for later. They returned to the cart and the attending goblin. Harry realized they still have over twenty minutes before the two senior goblins were expecting him and asked to go to the Black vault which was number fifty-four. Inside they found more money than in the Potter vault. Some of the chests of coins had been magically reduced in size to make more room. The vault had less lighting and seemed darker than the Potter vault. There were no heirlooms, but there were several rows of paintings. All of them were vacant except

for two. It contained a youthful Bellatrix Lestrange. She looked even younger than Tonks currently portrayed her. She was staring at him and Susan. The second one contained an older, but still youthful looking Narcissa, who showed no indications of life.

“Do I know you? You look a bit like someone I went to school with?” The portrait of the witch asked tilting her head to one side. Her hair was done in tiny ringlets. Bellatrix Black had been a very attractive young woman.

“Harry Potter. You’re probably thinking of my father James.” He replied rather tersely.

“Oh yes, Sirius’s partner in crime. Why are you in the Black family vault?”

“Sirius left me the title of Lord Black.”

“Cousin Sirius is dead too? If you are looking for a picture of him, his mother came down here and destroyed it before my picture was even painted. I doubt a replacement was ever made.”

“Yes. You killed him.” Harry glared directly into the eyes of the portrait.

“Really?” Bellatrix looked surprised, but thoughtful.

“When were you painted?”

“Just after my seventeenth birthday. It’s tradition. We’re supposed to come back and replace the painting with a newer one periodically, but I guess I never did. Looks like Cissy did though.”

“Why are you being so polite Bellatrix?”

The painting huffed indignantly. “I was raised properly. You are Lord Black and I am your property. I take it you didn’t care for the real me?”

“We tried our best to kill each other, if that answers your question. Were you a death eater when you were painted?”

"No. My induction was slated for the following June after my wedding to Rodolphus Lestrange. Were you the one to kill me then?"

"No. I did kill Rodolphus recently."

"Do I have any children?"

"No. You spent a good portion of your life in Azkaban. You got out earlier this year, but died on Azkaban yesterday. Did you want to become a Death Eater?"

"That doesn't sound like very good. To answer your question, I suppose so. My family expected it of me. My sister was to remain unmarked to protect our rights and fortune. In a sense I was expendable, but I was selected for my role because between the two of us I was the superior dueler. I considered it an honor to serve the family in any capacity."

"You were also insane." Harry said with a slight feeling of vindictiveness.

"That wasn't in my career plans. Apparently, things did not go so well? So are you here to hang one of my spare frames or are you here to destroy me?" The painting asked.

"Honestly, I didn't know you even existed. Why shouldn't I just leave you here to rot and stare at the fortune you never got to spend?"

"You can do as you wish Milord. I would prefer not to be destroyed. You obviously suffered at the hands of the real me. I am only a manifestation of her seventeen year old self. It would be nice to go somewhere other than here. I can't do that unless you take one of my spare frames with you. I am bound during my creation to protect and serve the Head of my family." Harry had hoped to feel the fire of righteous vengeance coursing through his veins. This wasn't the same Bellatrix. Hell, she wasn't even a Death Eater yet! Arguing with her or threatening her just didn't feel the same. It would be like going back in time and arguing with an eleven year old Draco Malfoy.

"I noticed your Aunt's painting drew her wand on someone I was arguing with. Can you cast spells?" Harry asked recalling the earlier argument with Molly Weasley.

"Not spells, a spell. It's a Black family secret. I guess Sirius never told you. Is she trustworthy?" The painting asked gesturing at Susan.

"In a short time she will be Lady Black, yes I trust her."

The painting took a moment and regarded her appraisingly before continuing. "Very well milord. During creation the painting is heavily enchanted. The frames are custom made by the wandmaker Ollivander. The wood of the frame also contains the same materials as our wand and its core. A single spell is chosen at the time of creation. The power to cast the spell is drawn from your ring, but only if someone is wearing it and is in the room. We are charged with protecting the Head of the Family and any he or she grants protection to. If you wish the particulars, you will need to speak with Phineas Nigellus or one of the older paintings. It should also be detailed in some of our more ancient tomes, in the event you and your finance opt to continue the tradition."

"Okay. I am curious, what spell can you cast?"

"The slug vomiting jinx." She answered proudly.

"Really, that's it. I half expect you to say Avada Kedavra?" It was actually rather disappointing.

"No milord. I don't believe very powerful spells can be endowed upon us. I heard that the Nigellus painting uses a standard cutting hex and my aunt's uses a silencer, a banisher or a stunner. You'll have to ask her. Cousin Regulus has a nasty tripping hex. We're not meant to fight, but assist you when you fight. Plus, it would be a large drain on your magic. A properly utilized slug spitting jinx, in the midst of a fight will leave your opponent defenseless, open to whatever counterstrike you plan. I chose that spell specifically for that purpose. I believe my sister chose the *Confundus* charm for similar reasons. Plus, when I was in school it was my preferred method of punishing those who crossed me. I am quite good at it. We always referred to it as the

‘Black Home Field Advantage.’ No head of the family has ever been defeated when he or she fought on one of our properties.”

Despite himself, Harry was impressed. The Blacks were obviously ingenious. A quick glance at Susan confirmed that she had never heard of something like this before. Harry knew that he would need to speak with Ollivander and sit for a painting himself. Even if he died, the painting could still trigger the brother wand effect against Voldemort, providing someone time to prepare a counter attack. Hopefully, Fawkes could be persuaded to contribute a feather. He asked the painting of Bellatrix a few more questions, but the young woman in the painting kept referring him to the paintings of people who had previously been the head of the family as she had never been privy to the knowledge. Harry told the painting that as soon as he confirmed this with the other paintings that he would return for one of her frames. To his list of things to do, he added inventorying the spells the paintings at headquarters could cast and placing them accordingly.

The cart ride back to the surface was as uneventful as any ‘one speed only’ cart ride could be. Someday when all this was over Harry promised that he would spend an entire day having the goblins take him back and forth to his vaults just for the thrill of the ride. Harry did use the ride as an excuse to press tightly up against Susan. She didn’t look nearly as thrilled, quite the contrary she looked more thrilled that the ride was over. Harry hopped out first and helped her climb out. He scored some additional ‘brownie points’ when he paused before releasing her left hand to run his thumb over her engagement ring and smile at her.

The two senior goblins were waiting for him as he walked away from the cart. Cleftskull smiled broadly at him leading them back to the secure office. “The elders have agreed to your proposition. They were most impressed by your reasoning. Do not mistake this for an alliance. It is merely a business arrangement that is beneficial to both parties.”

“Understood. It is a start. That is all that can be expected. What do we need to do to formalize our arrangement?” Harry asked.

“You will need to summon a family ring for the lines you wish me to represent. In an emergency you can simply give me the master ring, but I should have my own copy.”

“How do I do that?” Harry asked.

Susan interrupted. “I can show you.” She tapped her wand on her family ring and said a common spell for duplication. “You have to use your head of family ring. It can’t be forged, or at least no one has ever figured out a way to forge it yet.” She took the less impressive looking family ring and offered it to Cleftskull.

“Lady Bones, I did not realize you were also joining in this transaction.” Cleftskull paused and then noted Susan’s engagement ring. “Ah, I see you have resolved your mutual End-of-Line clauses. I offer my congratulations and hopes for prosperity to the two of you.” He accepted the ring and a moment later he received the rings Harry created for the Black and Potter line.

“You should now give me general instructions of how you would like me to vote in your stead.”

Harry thought for a moment. “Vote for good business. Do what is in the best interest of preventing the so-called Dark Lord from achieving his victory. Be the voice of your people and other magical races, who are treated with contempt by my kind. Justice and prosperity for the worthy. Vengeance for the unworthy.” Cleftskull smiled at the last part.

“I understand your directives Lord Potter. Do you wish to add anything Lady Bones?”

“No. I think Harry pretty much covered it. Cleftskull, you realize you are making yourself a target?”

“Yes. I am well aware of that, but the most successful business ventures always require risk.”

“Please call me Harry.”

“I will do so only in private. In public you must be Lord Potter. Anything less minimizes the power you are trying to exert. You will



need to introduce yourselves and be recognized by the Wizengamot. You should also cast any votes today. At the end of the session the Chief Warlock will call for any remaining business, then you will activate your touchstone in your box and wait to be recognized. Once you are recognized you will state that you have appointed me as your representative for your family lines. You can then immediately yield the floor to your Lady and allow her to do the same.”

“Is there a box for the Potters and the Blacks? Will Susan and I have to sit in separate boxes?” Harry asked. He was concerned about Susan being separated from him.

“No. You both should sit in the Potter box; it is the highest ranked of your bloodlines. Your votes are cast by touching your family ring to the appropriate touchstone. There are three stones. The white stone is a vote for something. The black stone is a vote against something and the amber stone is a request to be recognized by the floor to speak. You will need to touch both of your family rings and Lady Bones will need to touch hers. The Chief Warlock recognizes families by the ranking of your bloodlines. There are only five lines that are superior to the Potter line in this manner. You will be allowed to speak rather quickly. Speak clearly, be direct and show no weakness.”

“In private I also ask that you call me Susan.” Susan said. In truth, she wasn’t sure she wanted to be on such familiar terms with a goblin. She knew it was her upbringing in the pureblooded society, but she also knew her support for Harry needed to be unconditional.

“As you wish, Susan.” Cleftskull answered seeing the young woman’s discomfort. “They may introduce legislation to immediately prevent future appointments of nonhumans as representatives. When you introduce me, it should be the selected representative of the Goblin Elder council. Knowing that your representative is a position and not a particular goblin should prevent me from simply being killed and you would then be unable to reappoint another goblin.”

“Very shrewd.” Susan observed.

“A necessity if one wants to live to a very old age. I do not intend to waste the only life I was given.”

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“I see and old Wulf before me. Age does take its toll on the living. So the mighty Albus Dumbledore, debases himself to see the likes of a lowly vampire such as myself.”

“Greetings Darius. You look none the worse for wear. I received a rather vague note from Mr. Potter indicating that you would be here. I do recall a vow never to set foot on this soil again when you left for the mainland many years ago. What brings you back after so long?”

“My adopted clan viewed me as both expendable and an expert on the situation.”

“And the others?”

“Representatives of other clans, most likely either the ambitious sort wanting to meet the Dark Lord to curry favor or the expendable type who had made an enemy of their clan leader. Your young protégé dealt with all of us most effectively. I am surprised at you allowing a child no matter how capable access to the Unforgiveables.” Coedus enjoyed the look of shock on ‘the mighty Dumbledore’s’ face.

“Harry used Unforgiveables?” Dumbledore barely managed to say without stuttering.

“Quite well. He seemed well versed in the Extermination Act, pardon me the Dark Creature’s Act of 1903. His killing curse was quite effective and he used two very formidable Crucios on me. It has been a long time since I have felt that one.”

Coedus was thoroughly enjoying himself now. The ancient wizard in front of him looked like he was about to go catatonic.

“I must speak with him on this.” Dumbledore said more to himself than to the vampire in front of him.

“I am guessing your boy wonder omitted these things from his report?” Coedus mocked. “Oh thank you, fates! I have been in dire need of some humor. If I still was able to use a wand this would be Patronus worthy!”

Dumbledore regained his composure. Harry's actions were a matter for another time. "I assume you will be filing a report with your clan. What will you recommend?"

"I will note that the three other vampires were slain and that I barely escaped. I will recommend that my clan hold the Dark Lord to the original agreement and only join him once he has conquered England."

"What will you do then?"

"Leave, go back to Italy smell the warm sea air. Find what enjoyment in the existence that fate has given me."

"Perhaps you could offer to stay and monitor the situation. I could use your assistance."

"Why in the name of the everlasting one would I want to do that? I have given the location of the meeting with the Dark Lord's followers to the Potter boy. Staying would only make me a target. I may curse my existence, but I am not ready to give it up."

"What meeting?"

"Ah, the joke keeps getting better. Your protégé is moving out of your shadow. That must annoy you. I always knew what a control freak you were, Wulf. I have already provided him with the details and do not feel like repeating myself. Ask the boy. I shall be curious to see what he tells you."

"Still Darius, you must thirst for battle again, to be in the middle of the action. The auror I knew ..."

"The auror you knew is dead! The only thing I thirst for is blood! You would do well to remember that." Coedus answered with an angry edge to his voice.

"And you are quick to forget who took you in when no one else would. In your bitterness, you casually overlook all the gold I scraped together to give you when you left this country. Money I could have been using to fight the wizard you ended up serving."

“I did what I needed to survive!”

“So you did. I remember the proud warrior, but I see the survivor you have become. It suits you.”

Coedus put his fist into the wall shattering plaster. “Damn you! Damn your righteousness! You don’t know the hell of being a monster. Do you, Wulf? Do you know what it’s like to be a monster?”

“You always wanted to be the great hero, Darius. Sometimes there is no difference between hero and monster. I have seen decisions that I have made go horribly wrong and cost good men and women their lives. I have killed and realized later that it could have been avoided. Oh yes! There is so much glory standing over graves of people who were your friends and saying kind words about them. I bask in the looks of adoration from the widowed spouses and orphaned children. The only difference between the monster you are and the one I am is that your mistake only cost your life. Mine have killed so many others. Somehow, I manage to keep surviving mine.”

Both looked at each other feeling each other’s rage. Coedus thought long and hard on his next words.

“What would you have me do Wulf?”

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Harry shifted uncomfortably in the expensive chair. There were a total of six chairs in the box. Susan sat next to him and held his hand. Rufus Scrimgeour and Cleftskull had slipped in both unnoticed. The goblin wore a cloak pulled tightly. Rufus wore his best dress robes. He was exchanging pleasantries with William Parker, who was Director of International Affairs. Their box was situated directly on the left. The box on the right belonged to the Chesterfield family. Harry had never heard of them before, they greeted him and explained that they did not have any children attending school at this time. The next one would be their great grandson who is currently only seven. The Patriarch of the family, Robert mentioned that he had attended Hogwarts at the same time as Harry’s grandfather and namesake Harold. When Harry asked if he had any interesting stories to share the old man smiled and asked if Harry still had a certain cloak. He

then told Harry a story that involved several suits of armor enchanted to perform a waltz in the hallway in front of the staff lounge, including one that would attempt to partner with any female that came into the hallway. He concluded the story by mentioning that Harry should ask his Transfiguration professor about her year as Head Girl and her choice of dancing partners.

Harry was grateful for the distraction. It kept his mind from spinning out of control. He and Susan had managed a light lunch. Harry felt a nervousness that surpassed his typical quidditch jitters. Susan did her level best to calm him down. She even hinted that certain actions were well known stress relievers. That merely resulted in Harry choking on his juice. Perhaps she should have waited until he finished drinking, then again perhaps not. The laughter did lighten the mood somewhat. He resigned himself to an afternoon filled with nervous tension. Things took a strange turn only moments later.

“Hello, Harry Potter.” The voice of a young woman said.

Harry looked up and identified Marietta Edgecombe. She had just witnessed his embarrassing moment while she and a slightly older young man were sitting down next to them at the ice cream parlour. It reminded him of when she and Cho had witnessed him do pretty much the same thing.

“Marietta. It’s good to see you.” Harry lied smoothly wiping the table in front of him with his napkin. Occulmency is very useful for other things as well. He stared at her companion. He looked familiar, but Harry could not place the face.

“I’ll give you a hint,” the man said offering his hand. “You would remember me, but you were too busy coughing up a snitch.”

Harry thought for a second until the answer came to him. “Terry Higgs. Now I remember you.” Harry shook the former Slytherin seeker’s hand.

“Yes, I am already the answer to the question ‘who was the first seeker to lose to Harry Potter at quidditch?’ It’s in the latest version of Wizarding Trivial Pursuit. Imagine my horror when I was asked that

very question.” Terry said chuckling. “The funny part was the rest of my team still wanted to say Malfoy.”

“I would have liked a rematch.”

“Me too, but ickle baby Draco came along with his father’s money. I am just glad he hasn’t ever been able to beat you.”

“Well his broom is faster than yours, but you were the better flyer.” Harry answered. Maybe it had been the difference in size at the time, but he remembered desperately trying to avoid the larger seekers physical onslaught during that match.

“I did manage to mention it to the little wanker every time I saw him during my final year, how even with his brand new broom, you flew circles around him even with that jinxed bludger after you.”

Susan cleared her throat slightly. Harry shot her an apologetic look. “I’m sorry. I forgot to introduce you. Terry Higgs this is Susan Bones.” Terry offered his hand again and looked at the ring on Susan’s ring finger. Marietta caught it as well and leaned in closer.

“It’s beautiful.” Marietta said inspecting the ring. Harry noted for the first time that Marietta was wearing a much smaller diamond solitaire ring on the very same finger. “Does that mean what I think it does?” Her eyes were wide.

“Yes. I believe it does. You seem to have one as well.”

“Congratulations!” Marietta seemed genuine enough in her enthusiasm. “How long have the two of you been dating?” She asked. It had only been a few months since her best friend and Harry had been dating. Knowing Cho, Marietta supposed that she would be incensed. Cho had always been very emotional.

“Long enough to know he is the one for me.” Susan answered slyly. “How about you and Terry?”

“Well it’s an arranged marriage, but the boy has positively grown on me.” The beaming Ravenclaw answered patting Terry’s arm. Harry admitted to himself that they looked very happy together.

"When's the big day?" Susan asked.

"Sometime just after graduation. How about you?"

"We're still setting a date." Susan answered evasively.

Terry and Harry looked at each other and shrugged as both the women engaged a rapid question and answer session. They talked about quidditch and about Terry's job at the publishing firm for a few minutes only to turn back to their women and listen to discussions about wedding party sizes.

Terry looked thoughtful. "It's nice to be able to talk about something other than Azkaban."

"You're right." Harry said noticing an auror patrol walking past wearing black armbands.

"Think they will finally get a new minister in office?"

"Let's hope so. Indecision and uncertainty play into Voldemort's hands." Harry said forgetting the social taboo of saying the Dark Tosser's name in public. Both Terry and Marietta shifted uncomfortably.

After about ten seconds of uncomfortable silence Harry said, "Sorry didn't mean to kill the mood. How is Cho?"

"We haven't been talking that much. She and Michael are still going out, but I don't think it is going to work." Marietta said stirring her iced tea.

"I'm sorry to hear you two aren't on good terms. Was it me?"

"Not wholly, but it was definitely part of it. I know she stood up for me in public, but still I could see that she felt I was to blame."

"Don't worry about it." Harry said looking at Susan remembering their discussion from the first night they were in number twelve together. "I have it on good authority that Cho and I were doomed as a couple. As I recall, you never really approved either."

"I tried to tell her that the two of you were not right for each other. You might have to watch out for her though. I think she is going to be Head Girl this year. It's either going to be her, Donna Wentworth from Hufflepuff or Melissa Caruthers from Slytherin. She can hold a grudge, so I'd stay out of the broom closets if I were you two."

Terry and Marietta's lunch arrived and Harry and Susan got up to leave. Marietta stopped him. "Harry, I just want to say I am sorry for what happened last year. My family was pressuring me to help the Toad." It was a brave admission from a girl who had spent the last few months as a virtual exile from the rest of the student body.

"You chose to support your family over a bunch of schoolmates you hardly knew. You thought you were doing right. I don't think you intended on doing any harm. I read that your mum was sent to Azkaban. Is she okay?"

"No one has heard. My father is at the Ministry already searching for any updates. I am trying not to think about it." Marietta said looking away.

"Hopefully you'll get some good news. Come on Susan, we should go." Harry had to admit that a week ago, if someone had told him that he would be exchanging small talk with Marietta Edgecombe while dining with his fiancée, he would have told them that they were barking mental.

He woke from his reverie, to watch Albus Dumbledore enter the hall and move down the center isle. He could feel his anger rising and realized he was squeezing Susan's hand very hard, so hard she yelped in a bit of pain. She rubbed her hand and looked at Harry, who was now staring down the Chief Warlock. Both of Harry's hands were now squeezing his armrests so hard that his knuckles were turning white.

Susan could see that Dumbledore's gaze was fixed on Harry's as he walked to his seat at the podium. She could feel the tension between the two wizards. Dumbledore stood at his dais and cast the *Sonorous* charm.



"I call this meeting of the Wizengamot to order. I ask the powers that be to grant us the wisdom to govern justly. New business shall be first on the agenda."

Rufus tapped Harry and Susan and gestured for them to touch their family rings to the touchstone. Even from their vantage point they could see several twinkles of light appear on the board where Dumbledore and his assistant sat.

"The chair recognizes Lord Harry Potter." Harry stood and a light similar to a muggle spotlight shined on him.

Harry stood remembering everything Rufus and Cleftskull had drilled into his head for the last twenty minutes. "I am Lord Harry Potter, blood heir of the Potter line. By my possession of the Potter family ring I claim my rights. I am the titled heir of the Black line. By my possession of the Black family ring I claim my rights. As head of the Black family I claim the Lestrangle family's rights and challenge those who currently claim those rights to defend their claim." A murmur went through the hall.

"I defend those rights in the name of Lady Narcissa Malfoy. You may possess the title, but her claim is by blood."

Dumbledore interrupted. "Baron. Caruthers, your objection is noted. However, I must inform you that Narcissa Malfoy does not exist." The murmur grew to an uproar as Dumbledore shouted for silence.

"What! That is preposterous! Have you finally lost grip on your addled brain old man?" Caruthers sneered.

"No, my wits are as keen as ever. I merely state that yesterday Lord Potter in his capacity as Lord Black negated Narcissa Black's marriage to one Lucius Malfoy. The cause was breach of marital contract. I witnessed both parties' sign the paperwork, as did representatives from Gringotts. The paperwork is now on file at the Ministry as of this morning. I have taken the liberty of bringing several copies for your review. Officially, Narcissa Malfoy no longer exists. I also have the paperwork for Lord Potter's claim of the Lestrangle votes and all appears to be in order. I understand this also currently suspends the Malfoy family votes until they can be claimed by blood

or title under the articles which govern this body.” Dumbledore said coolly as an intern was directed to take the paperwork to the Caruthers’s box. The man was livid with rage. He and several people in his box and the next box flipped through the paperwork with obvious disgust on their face. With the spotlight still shining on him, Harry suppressed the urge to grin.

“While our esteemed colleague scrutinizes the paperwork, we shall move on with other recognitions.”

There were two other recognitions before the spotlight shined on Susan as she stood and claimed her voting rights. There was a slight murmur that she was seated in the Potter box. Harry scanned the room and saw the eyes of Rita Skeeter upon him. She smiled a ‘cat that ate the canary’ grin at him. Harry merely returned her smile.

‘If you think that is interesting, then you had better hold on to your seat, Ms. Skeeter.’

There was one other recognition after Susan’s and then the board was empty except for the single light, which indicated Harry’s recognition. Five additional minutes went by. Dumbledore drummed his fingers lightly on the podium. Finally, he spoke.

“I am sorry to cut this short Horatio, but we do need to move onward. The paperwork is on file at the Ministry and has already been accepted. Have you found anything objectionable?” In answer the man simply leered at Albus Dumbledore, but for an old man whom had fought would be world conquerors, it had no effect. “I am sorry Horatio, perhaps my age is getting to me. I did not hear your answer?”

“No, there is no objection.” The man spat out each word as if it were its own sentence.

“Very well then, on to floor motions.” At least twenty touchstones triggered on Dumbledore’s board including Harry’s. One of the twinkling lights was two positions ahead of Harry’s own. They would speak first.

“The floor recognizes the Lord Sykes.”

“I do not like this last second paper filing business at all. It smells of a sham. I motion for an immediate recess. I yield the floor to Baron Caruthers.”

“I second this motion. It is a farce of the highest order.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Unfortunately according to the articles which govern us, I cannot allow this motion. As you are well aware, if there is no sitting Minister of Magic and the Wizengamot is in session we must have at least one vote to attempt to appoint an interim Minister. My apologies Lord Sykes and Baron Caruthers, but I must strike that motion. Now let us see who is next – Lord Potter.” Dumbledore said the words very slowly.

Harry stood again going over his notes in his head. “I nominate Rufus Scrimgeour to be the interim Minister of Magic. He is currently acting Director of Magical Law Enforcement and prior chief of aurors. Upon making his acquaintance, he has impressed me as someone capable of leading our country in this time of trouble. I yield the floor to Lady Bones.” Harry said taking his seat.

Susan stood very nervous, “I second the nomination. My Aunt Amelia spoke highly of Mr. Scrimgeour’s professionalism and dedication. In her memory I do this.”

Dumbledore gave a penetrating look at Harry for a moment before returning to the board and calling on the others. Within ten minutes, there were no less than ten candidates for the post. Harry searched the crowd and found the eyes of Amos Diggory upon him. The man looked withered and tired, a far cry from the jovial man who had accompanied him and the Weasleys to the World Cup.

Upon his turn Amos stood. “I have been put forth on several occasions as a candidate. But this time I refuse the nomination and ask those who support me to back Lord Potter’s nomination.” The silence in the room was stunning. Two minutes later there were only three remaining candidates. Five of the six who declined the nomination asked their supporters to back Rufus Scrimgeour.

The vote was a mere formality. Rufus Scrimgeour received a full sixty percent of the vote and was appointed Interim Minister of Magic to

serve out the remaining two years of Fudge's five year term. Harry turned to Rufus and shook his hand during the din of applause. Harry chanced a glance at Rita who had a second quick quotes quill in the air and was writing manually with a third.

Dumbledore's voice using the *Sonorous* charm again carried over the noise. There was a hint of false cheer in his tone. "Now that we have appointed an Interim Minister of Magic, we can move on to new business." There were several votes some were mostly symbolic like the motion saluting the heroism of the fallen at Azkaban. Others were trivial that truly made Harry realize that a life of politics did not suit him. He sought Rufus's advice on several minor issues. Dumbledore made the call for closing business to adjourn the meeting. This time only Harry and Susan's lights blinked. Dumbledore almost reluctantly called out 'Lord Potter' again.

Harry stood once more feeling weight of the eyes upon him. "I need to introduce my representative, who will vote in my stead whilst I am involved in other matters. My representative is a post appointed by the Goblin Elder Council. Their choice to fill that position is Cleftskull of Gringotts. I empower the Council to appoint replacements as needed until such time as I rescind their right to do so. I yield to Lady Bones."

Harry smiled as screams of objections filled the hall. The chaos was everything he had expected. It took two full minutes to quiet the crowd, before Susan could repeat the speech word for word as a room mostly full the haughty and the arrogant realized that a goblin controlled fourteen votes in their government. Immediately several made motions without even using their touchstones. Eventually Dumbledore pointed out that new motions were not allowed by procedure during closing business and adjourned the meeting. Rufus whispered his private floo address in Harry's ear and walked off to meet with his Auror protection. Harry saw Rita and Dumbledore both moving towards him as he took a moment to shake Cleftskull's hand and wish him lasting prosperity.

He turned to face the Chief Warlock. "Hello Dumbledore." He said coldly.

“We will have words Harry.”

“Count on it Old Man.”

## Chapter 15 – Stun Hannah and join me in the tub

“Fred! Get out here! You have a visitor.” Lee Jordan called into the back room from the counter where he was working. He was more than a bit annoyed with his hair currently flaming red. His ‘employers’ promised that the effect would wear off before he went home for the day. Unfortunately, that was two days ago. Right now they were introducing him as the seventh Weasley brother while looking into the ‘unexpected complication’. He supposed it was better than the four hours he spent with a pig snout and tail. The twins said that particular joke was inspired by a story Hagrid had told the two about Harry Potter’s eleventh birthday.

The sniffing woman in front of him seemed to ignore his predicament. He vaguely remembered her as a Ravenclaw who graduated a couple of years ago, Penny something or other. She and Percy used to hound the twins endlessly when he was head boy and she was a Prefect.

Fred Weasley sauntered out from the back room. He still had the lexan face shield on he had been wearing while brewing potions. Fred had seen that muggles often used these to protect themselves from dangerous chemicals. Having purchased a couple, he was most pleased with the results. He was a bit amazed that Hogwarts never recommended that students purchase such things. Then again, given who the current potion’s master was it wasn’t all that surprising. Fred was also considering trying to add a fume hood to the area they used to brew their potions. His ever sympathetic twin did not consider the loss of significant amounts of nose hair to be worth the expenditure. When pressed, George said if it becomes a problem they could simply figure out a way to selectively grow nose hair. He had a look of inspiration and said that it had possibilities for a most excellent prank. Contrary to what the world believed of the two, there was a difference. George was the dreamer and Fred was the worker.

“Oi! Lee, I was just in the middle of something interesting.” Lee cringed out of reflex. Anytime one of the twins found something ‘interesting’, it was cause for concern.

“Have you seen Percy? He didn’t come home yesterday! With all these bad things happening ... ” The young woman demanded.

Fred stopped for a moment and looked at the person in front of him. Except for the puffy face and obvious signs of distress, she was very pretty and somewhat familiar.

“Penny Clearwater?”

“Actually, it’s Penny Weasley. We got married on Valentine’s day.” She said wiping the tears out of her puffy eyes. “I wouldn’t normally come here, but I am just so worried. They wouldn’t let me in the Ministry this morning. Please tell me that you have heard something.”

At least a dozen responses flashed through Fred’s mind. All of them save one could be considered the response of a smart ass. He chose the one that wasn’t. It was a shock that his brother had married and not informed the family.

“Why don’t you follow me into the back? I’ll get some tea and we’ll floo Mum.” He said with uncharacteristic seriousness that made Lee look at him.

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“Do you want to air our dirty laundry in front of Rita? Or should we go back to my house?” Harry asked as he stared Dumbledore down. Rita’s eyes were practically glazed over at the moment. Harry could see her silent plea to the powers that be for a genuine scoop.

“Perhaps it is best if we retire elsewhere. Be there in thirty minutes.” The headmaster answered rather tersely. The Chief Warlock spun away and headed towards newly appointed interim Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour.

“Harry, so delightful to see you again! ” Rita’s voice positively dripped with false sweetness. “Can you spare a few minutes for a girl trying to earn a living?”

“At least you didn’t say a honest living. I think I would have lost my lunch.” Harry replied dryly.

“Oh you wound me, Harry or should I say Lord Potter? And who is this delightful young lady at your side?”

Susan slid her engagement ring off her finger into her pocket and reached out to grasp Rita's hand. She was well aware of the problems this particular witch had caused Harry during the tournament. Despite the uncharacteristically factual article Rita had written for the Quibbler last year, Susan was not inclined to trust the woman in front of her.

“Susan Bones, Ms. Skeeter. We've never had the pleasure although you did skewer my Aunt almost as much as you have Harry.”

Harry arched an eyebrow wondering what ax Rita had to grind against the late Amelia Bones. A frown darkened Rita's expression for a brief second.

“Oh I am so sorry about your Aunt dear. She was a powerful person and powerful people attract attention. I had nothing but respect for Madame Bones.”

Susan's expression hardened. “So all those rumors and lies about her sexual orientation you spread were done out of respect? Are you really sorry she is gone or are you upset that you've lost one of your favorite targets?”

Rita Skeeter was not easily deterred by a teenager. She continued barely missing a beat. “Oh of course I am saddened by her loss. She was such a fascinating person to interview. So, you and Harry? You make such a lovely couple, much less of a contrast than the Muggleborn girl. Harry, your taste in women is improving.”

“What can I do for you today Rita?” Harry said trying to cut to the chase.

“Well considering you have just thrown the entire government into chaos, I would say you are quite the newsmaker today. You've even managed to upset the White Bearded Wonder. Normally, I can only get a little rise out of the old coot. You seem to be more of a political animal than I had ever imagined – a regular political ‘seeker’ in action. What were your motivations today Harry? What led you to ally



yourself with Rufus Scrimgeour? How did you get the Goblins to represent you? Why did your friend take her ring off? Such a nice looking emerald too.” Rita said smiling like a predator.

“I want to stop Voldemort, Rita.” Harry said enjoying Rita’s flinch. “Rufus Scrimgeour opposes him as well and has convinced me that he is the best person for the job. This is war Rita. We wouldn’t be nearly as bad off, if all of Britain hadn’t spent the last year in denial. Your little smear campaign against me and the old coot contributed to that. As to your question about the Goblins, they have just as much to lose in this war as anyone else. They deserve a chance to be heard as well. Susan took her ring off, because, if possible she apparently likes you even less than I do. Feel free to quote me on Scrimgeour and the Goblins. You can say that Susan appear to be an idiot. Under no circumstances mention that ring. We’re not exactly hiding the fact, but I don’t intend to go broadcasting it either.”

“But Harry the readers will want to know.” Rita had a slight whine to her voice.

Harry’s expression darkened. His tone became more menacing. “So would Voldemort. This isn’t like last time Rita. The Minister likes me. You might find yourself on the wrong side this time. If you print her name, she becomes target number one and if something happens to her, you become target number two.”

Susan was astounded by Harry’s protectiveness. “Harry, I’m guessing he’s going to figure it out anyway. I don’t think you get to be a Dark Lord by being stupid. I was already in danger. Might as well give him a good reason to come after me. You saved me from him once already. If he tries again, I believe you’ll stop him again. Print what you will, Ms. Skeeter.” Susan said taking her ring back out and putting it back on her finger.

Harry looked at Susan with an angry look on his face. He grabbed her hand and led her away. “We are done here.”

They didn’t speak as they pressed pass the mass of humanity in the lobby. He dragged her onwards out in to the street. She could tell he was angry at her. He held out his portkey for her to touch and said ‘Naked Hannah’ sending them hurtling back to Harry’s home. They

both stumbled to the kitchen floor. He stood and brushed himself off and immediately went into the parlor. She followed him. Kevin and Lisa were in the parlor playing a card game.

"Lisa, Kevin, would you mind giving us a minute." Harry said. The two quickly left the room. Harry silenced the door and locked it.

"What the hell was that back there, Susan?"

"Oh come off it Harry. The bastard will figure it out, sooner or later. You didn't try and hide it from Lavender. Why the big change now?"

"You don't know Skeeter like I do. She'll print it for everyone to see. You'll be in more danger."

"You think that you are the only one she's ever screwed over for a story! She made a living before you came along. Didn't you hear what I was saying about my Aunt? She kept hinting that Auntie was a lesbian in her little gossip column. She even once implied there was something going on between her and my Mum for Merlin's sake!"

"Still, I don't want to give Voldemort any other reason to come after you."

"Listen carefully Harry. I. Don't. Care. He's going to try and get me anyway. If he doesn't figure it out now, he will when we are in our private quarters at school. It will take just as long as it takes Malfoy's owl to fly out of Hogwarts. Ease up on the overprotective routine. Dumbledore will be here soon and you need to have your wits about you or he will eat you alive. Save your anger for him."

Harry stopped for a minute and calmed himself down. He wanted to say something convincing, but everything he came up with would be insulting to Susan. He couldn't say she wasn't ready for it. After all, he took her with him to fight Dementors last night. He realized he was in a no-win situation. He was angry at himself for letting his temper get the better of him. The only silver lining out of this moment he could find was that he realized that he didn't have a rational argument against it and stopped short of causing a big argument between the two of them. Sometimes admitting defeat is an option.

“You’re right, Susan. Everything about that woman pisses me off.”

“Good to see you come around. I figured this was going to be a blazing row between the two of us. It’s nice to see you can be reasoned with. There’s hope for you yet. Now how are we going to handle Dumbledore?”

“We?”

“Yes. If you think I am going to let you go up against him by yourself, you are even more wrong than you were just a second ago. He’ll try to use your temper against you and when he does I’ll be there to stop him. We’re a team. Got it? Good.” Harry was getting used to having his way recently. Right now Susan had pretty much stopped him cold in his tracks. It didn’t hurt that she was looking very cute while she was reading him the riot act.

“Okay Susan, what do you suggest?”

“Well, I’ll start by getting my pensieve. We’ll put your conversation with your relatives in there from my perspective and make him watch it. Maybe that will shake him up a bit, when he sees how much your fat pig of an Uncle wanted to kill you. I know you two got into an argument at Auror Headquarters on the night you saved me. You were throwing off some serious magic from the breakroom. He’ll be expecting that. You need to keep control. Use that Occulmency, you keep talking about. What’s with the smile?”

“Well if you must know, it’s partly because you are impressive when you are taking charge and the other thing was you called it ‘the night you saved me’. That’s the first time I have heard you call it that. It’s nice to see you focusing on the positive.”

Susan flushed slightly before continuing. “That’s sweet Harry, but don’t interrupt me when I am on a roll. Anyway, he is going to come in here all calm, cool, and collected and he will expect you to get all angry and explosive. If I suddenly jump in and start laying into him, it means back off and cool down for a minute. Well in all fairness, it could also mean that I am pissed as well.”

“When you go get your pensieve, ask Hannah if you can borrow her mind shield and put it on. I bet he tries to get into your mind. She said it is supposed to start getting warm if it detects a mind attack.”

Harry canceled the locking charm on the door and watched Susan head into the kitchen. While she was gone he asked each of the three paintings in the parlor what spells they were able to cast. Apparently, the previous heads of the family like to be secure when greeting visitors in the parlor. Two of them cast ordinary spells, a stunner and a rope-binding charm, typical third and fourth year stuff. The other one cast *Faux Kedavra*. The spell doesn't do anything other than look like the killing curse. The painting told him that it is disruptive as hell and is meant to force the victim to stop what they are doing and dodge. Especially, when you yell the last word of the incantation. When asked if the painting had ever used it, the man who was called Tarazed Black said three times in the past one hundred and fifty years, but only once in this house. The painting even demonstrated the wand motions and incantation for him. By the time Susan returned floating the pensieve with her wand, Harry had successfully cast the spell. He explained that the spell is one that Aurors once used and may still use to practice dodging. Harry remembered that he would have to ask Tonks about it later. Harry stuck his head out beyond the privacy charm and asked Dobby to bring some refreshments into the parlor and also escort the Headmaster when he arrives.

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Albus Dumbledore was not a very happy man. His meeting with Scrimgeour had been very brief and not very useful. He had been unable to really get a feel for the man. He had been a Ravenclaw in school, but house affiliation told less and less about a person as they grew older. There was an old headmaster joke that if they waited to sort a child until they were fifteen, every last one of them would be in Slytherin.

After his all too brief meeting with the newly appointed Minister of Magic who promised to work him into his schedule as soon as he had a person to help him with his schedule, he was accosted by none other than Rita Skeeter.

“Oh Albus, I was just looking for you. What is your reaction to Minister Scrimgeour’s appointment? Any comments for the record?”

“I am glad to see a resolution to the crisis and I look forward to working with the new Minister.” Albus said plainly.

“Oh dear, not exactly a resounding endorsement from the Chief Warlock. I know you have been a strong supporter of William Parker as of late. Aren’t you the least bit disappointed?”

“Mr. Parker is a fine man, but it is time to support Mr. Scrimgeour.

“Certainly you must be impressed by young Harry’s performance? Imagine a room full of veteran politicians undone by a mere child? I assume you advised him at some point. The thing with the Goblins, that was positively juicy. I normally regard the Wizengamot meetings as a necessary evil of my job, but this one was better than most high society parties.”

“I am pleased by young Mr. Potter’s willingness to participate in our political process. His initiatives are a breath of fresh air. If you’ll excuse me Ms. Skeeter, I must be going.”

“Last question, do you approve of the relationship between Harry and Susan Bones? I saw a positively dazzling ring on her left hand and the two of them looked very comfortable together. Any truth to the rumor that you will be performing their marriage ceremony?”

“Ms. Skeeter, I do not have the time to engage in idle speculation about the social lives of two of my students. Now, I really must be going.”

Rita watched Albus Dumbledore walk away while her story began to write itself in her mind. It was a tantalizing tale about a young man with dangerous eyes and a talent for pissing off the older generations. The old man had been fairly protective of the boy when he was at school. Now he was lukewarm at best. Perhaps her readers would enjoy the story of the driven, rebellious teenager, with eyes for the girl he saved from a Dark Lord’s clutches. She would need to tap a few sources for more background his encounter with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but there was a delicious story out there. It might even be

worth calling in a marker or two with her contacts at Gringotts, she'd been saving them for a rainy day and from the looks of things there's storm clouds on the horizon.

Dumbledore stepped out of the floo and into the kitchen at Headquarters. Hestia Jones was sitting at the kitchen table and greeted him. The wizarding wireless set had several political commentators jockeying for airtime discussing the 'historic' Wizengamot meeting. Dobby was standing there waiting for him proudly wearing a tiny sailor's suit that appeared to have been castoff by a muggle family. A tea cozy rested on his head in place of where the beret should have been.

"Master Harry Potter is saying that I is to be escorting the Great Wizard Albus Dumbledore to him in the parlor." Dobby said standing straight and tall at the importance of his assignment.

"Very well Dobby. Please lead on." It was only ten or fifteen feet and it wasn't as if he had never been in the house before. He recalled that the senior elves at the school had mentioned that Dobby was 'a bit off' even by their estimation. The elf opened the door and stepped inside the room. Albus felt the touch of magic he recognized as a privacy charm as he crossed the threshold.

"I is presenting Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Supreme Mugwump, Slayer of the Dark Wizard Grind ..."

Through the entire introduction Susan Bones had an incredulous look on her face and Harry Potter simply shook his head from side to side while massaging his forehead with his thumb and index finger. "That's enough. Thank you Dobby. Please bring the refreshments and close the door when you leave."

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"That's it dear let it all out." Molly Weasley whispered into her newly discovered daughter-in-law's ear. She was still recovering with Percy's loss and now Bill's injuries, when Fred floo called her and asked her to come to the shop. She had been fortunate to be able to contact Hestia and arrange for her to mind the children. Arthur had

been summoned to the Ministry to collect Percy's body, yet another blow to learn his body had been reanimated and set loose in the Ministry itself! It was a shock to learn that Percy had married and hadn't seen fit to inform the family. Molly recalled her son's tumultuous relationship with Penelope Clearwater. Percy only ever talked to his mother about matters of the heart.

"But it's so hard. I don't know how I can go on with out him. I don't feel safe at our house and the Healer's said I should be careful doing magic until the baby is further along."

"B-B-Baby?" Molly said with her eyes flying wide. Penelope had been sitting on a bench and was wearing bulky robes. Fred moved closer to steady his now swooning mother.

"You're pregnant?"

Her new daughter looked up with puffy eyes and a tear-streaked face. "I'm a little over three months now. I was hoping to convince Percy to reconcile before the child is born. That's too late now!" Penny broke off sobbing uncontrollably into her mother-in-law's chest.

Molly hugged Penny tightly feeling the tears stinging her eyes. She was going to be a grandmother. She had figured that Bill and Fleur would eventually marry and that she should start preparing for this eventuality. She had also been more than a little concerned at Fred and George's 'exploits' leading to a quick wedding. Now the eventuality was suddenly here in the midst of a tragic and upsetting day. She broke down in tears at the thought of a new generation of Weasleys being born in the shadow of war.

Fred struggled watching his mum and new sister crying. He felt a tear or two in his eyes. He wasn't good with crying females. George was better, or at least he had more experience. Alicia was an emotional basket case. Angelina was much more level headed. George actually asked if he would consider switching for the night after Alicia had her Holyhead tryout. Fred flatly refused and told him to go fix his own problems. He fidgeted for a couple of minutes trying to think of something to say. Everything he could think of sounded juvenile. In the end all he could think of was to go over and give both women a hug. Surprisingly, it was enough.

Molly snorted in a rather undignified manner especially at the support of one of her sons. "Well, I have to get a hold of Dumbledore and we'll get you moved to someplace safe. I promise we'll take care of you, dear."

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"Perhaps it would be best if Ms. Bones were to leave." Albus said walking into the room and watching Dobby depart.

"Best for whom?" Susan's sarcastic answer came. "I'm not going anywhere." If she had stopped to think, she would be amazed at the change in her brought on by Harry. Two weeks ago the idea of defending her wizard by standing up to Albus Dumbledore would have seemed beyond ridiculous.

"I see." The headmaster said slowly. "Allow me to offer my congratulations, you appear to have chosen well."

Harry answered venom dripping from his voice. "Amazingly enough, both Susan and I had a choice in this. In fact, we had the only opinions that really matter at all."

"I see. Ms. Skeeter was asking if I would be performing the ceremony. I daresay it will not be long before Tom is alerted."

"Fuck Tom! I've spent every moment since Wormtail killed Cedric hiding from him. If I stop trying to live and planning for a future then the best I can ever manage is a draw where both of us die!"

"Harry, we shouldn't speak of this."

"I already told her. She knows the gist of the prophecy not the particular wording. Do you honestly think I would bring her into my life and not tell her?"

"Have you told anyone else?"

"Bill and Remus. Bill because I trust him and Remus because he deserved to know."



“William already has an adequate mental defense. Susan will need to be trained. You do realize that Remus is vulnerable after his transformations.”

“Oh the old ‘don’t trust him because he is a dark creature’ line again. I wonder if my parents would be here today if they had chosen Remus instead of Peter. The Abbott sisters are going to help train Susan.” Harry stopped noticing Dumbledore had locked eyes with Susan. He knew what was coming next.

“Ouch!” Susan yelled pulling the suddenly hot amulet out of her blouse. Harry reacted immediately by initiating his own mind probe of the headmaster. He saw the tripwires with at least three times the number of layers that Hannah possessed. The images moved at varying speeds. It was much more confusing. As he struggled through memory after memory, he began to see Dumbledore’s core shield forming as the headmaster began to respond to Harry’s intrusion. Harry redoubled his efforts to push forward.

Dumbledore ended his probe of Susan and turned to counter Harry’s assault. There was no style or technique to what Harry was doing. It was the mental equivalent of a bull in the china shop. Dumbledore knew his outer defenses were more than adequate for the task at hand. He decided to respond by sending a probe against Harry’s core defenses. He noted the presence of no outer tripwires. Harry’s core was a simple, but effective barrier. He began chipping away at it. In his mind he sighed and resigned himself to disciplining Harry by breaking his crude shield.

Harry felt the strain of Dumbledore’s probe. Harry’s own probe faltered uncertainly having never experienced the need to attack and defend at the same time. Harry could feel the beginnings of a massive headache. The pressure on his mind increased at least three fold and he staggered back into the chair under the withering gaze of Albus Dumbledore. Suddenly, the pressure stopped as he felt a warming sensation in his hand.

Dumbledore felt the stunner slam into his side. It dazed him. Groggily he looked back at Harry only to see the red wave of energy of Harry’s

own stunner. His last thought before losing consciousness was to wonder how Harry had hidden someone there.

“Well that went well.” Susan said sarcastically. Seeing the stunners and the rope-binder hit the Headmaster. She had been in the middle of casting a body bind.

“I told you that he would do it.” Harry muttered massaging his temples. He flicked his wand and levitated Dumbledore’s wand into the air. Susan watched as Harry floated it across the room and dropped it on the table. Harry cast an adhesive charm on the wand affixing it to the tabletop.

“Well that should stop things from escalating.”

Susan was about to reply when something suddenly appeared in the room. It took her a moment to recognize that the something was a phoenix. The bird hovered protectively in front of the fallen wizard. She recalled the rumor that the headmaster had one.

“Hello Fawkes. If it makes any difference to you, he started it.” Harry said casually. The phoenix seemed unimpressed and trilled a warning at him.

“Fine. Be that way. I am going to bind his hands and wake him up. Will you allow me to do this? I don’t intend to harm him, but if he threatens either me or Susan again, I will not hesitate to harm him or you.” Fawkes seemed to relent and flew over to the couch and settled down. Its eyes never left Harry.

Harry removed the ropes that had encircled Dumbledore’s legs, but cast a rope of his own around Dumbledore’s wrists. Using the *mobilicorpus* spell Harry moved him over to the couch.

“*Enervate*.” Harry said waving his wand at Dumbledore, while taking a seat next to Susan on the loveseat. The ancient wizard came to and sat back up regarding his bound hands and sighing.

“Hello again sir. Perhaps we could try this again without coming into my house and attacking Susan’s mind. Fawkes seems a bit upset

with me at the moment. I would hate to damage our relationship further.”

“How did you stun me?”

“Not inclined to tell you at the moment. I may be forced to rely on it to protect me at some point in the future. A good start would be offering an apology to Susan.”

“I was merely trying to assess her natural mental defenses. I assume that is Ms. Abbott’s mind shield.”

“You can assume whatever you want. Hannah and I tested each other’s defenses this morning and I believe it is good form to ask permission first.”

“Indeed it is. Please accept my apologies, Susan. You seemed to have developed rudimentary defenses, Harry. I am glad you were able to learn something from Professor Snape.”

“That man taught me nothing. I figured this out on my own. Hell, I didn’t even know about tripwires until I spoke with Hannah and Chelsea this morning. Maybe if you checked up on his methods you would see that.” Harry spat.

“I received regular reports on your progress. It said that you were unable to get past the first step of clearing your mind.”

“Yes. He would follow ‘Clear your mind’ with an immediate attack. Now that I have had a chance to do some reading on the matter, it seems that I should have been meditating for an hour before coming to my lesson. He never seemed to mention that little fact. Nor did he speak of anything to detect an incoming attack. Gee, do you think Tom might have known what nights he was going to torture me so I’d be at my weakest. You ever ask him that?”

Dumbledore shook his head showing no outward emotion. Inside he added these facts to the growing list of concerns he had about the actions of Severus Snape. “No, Harry I did not. I see some of my faith in him has been misplaced. It will be addressed at a later date. Right

now we need to discuss your relationship with the new Minister and the Goblins.”

Susan took this opportunity to speak up. Harry was not particularly rattled, but she was a bit annoyed. “Before we discuss anything, I would like you to go over there and look at my memory from last night. After you watch that, I want you to ask yourself why we need to tell you anything?”

“Very well. Will you release me?”

Harry waved his wand the ropes disappeared. Dumbledore walked over to the pensieve and entered the memory recollection device. While they waited for him to return, they sat on the loveseat and ate some sandwiches that Dobby had prepared. Fawkes continued to glare at Harry. Harry decided to address the bird.

“Good thing this didn’t happen second year, Fawkes. My loyalty to him right now wouldn’t be able to call a damn thing. I was pretty naïve back then. I’m sure I’ll get the ‘greater good’ speech, that doesn’t mean just because he decided it was for the best that I have to agree with him. Especially when it is my life being controlled for his vision of the greater good.” The phoenix answered by relieving itself on the couch, burning a hole into the cushion.

“I don’t think Fawkes likes being lectured to, Harry.” Susan added.

“Who does? Well you are ready for round two?”

“Yes. I suppose I am. It’s strange though. I feel like I am a schoolgirl who has been caught doing something wrong.”

“Don’t. That’s the problem with people like him. He’s used to being revered and not questioned. I’m worried that could end up being me one day.”

“I’ll be around to keep you on your toes, Mister.”

“I’m counting on that.”

Dumbledore stepped back away from the pensieve with a sober look on his face. "I see the Dursleys opted to blame you for their misfortunes. You were correct. We were all adults and we entered into that agreement. I did not know it would cause Petunia's miscarriages, but I was aware that it would bind her to the property for several years. When they contacted me after the third miscarriage, I realized that the ritual was most likely the culprit. The healer confirmed it. As you are already learning, life often forces one to choose the lesser of the two evils. I chose to force them to live up to their end of the agreement. The blood wards were too effective at that time to compromise. There were two attempts on your life before you reached the age of three. The wards killed both hit wizards. I made sure that word of their demise reached others in their profession to deter future attempts. In all likelihood they were employed by Lucius Malfoy to test the defenses that protected you. Your relatives were incorrect when they believed that harming you would result in harm to Petunia. Had they asked you and learned of the many injuries you had suffered during your adventures, they would have discovered that was not the case."

Harry digested the new information. "That's all well and good, but if you are looking for forgiveness you are in the wrong place. I should have had three more cousins. Their blood is on both our hands. You seem to be able to live with yourself. But the past is just that - the past. You can't do anything about them any more than I can do anything about Sirius falling through the veil. If by some miracle both of us survive this war, I want nothing to do with you ever again. If I get a chance to write my version of this story, you can be assured that I won't be leaving this part out of it."

"How you feel is understandable. Perhaps when this is all behind us, we may be able to make amends, then again perhaps not. What is important is how we move forward from here. You have made a deal with the Goblins and handed Rufus Scrimgeour the Ministry. I hope you were not rash in your decisions."

"Scrimgeour wants to fight the Death Eaters. He's not marked. I checked him."

“He doesn’t have to be marked to be an enemy. I doubt Baron Caruthers is marked, but he is no less a servant of Tom than Lucius.”

“Anything is better than Fudge. Scrimgeour at least wants to put up a fight.”

“Politicians say what they need to say to get power.”

“Is that why you are one?”

“Hopefully in fifty years, when you are alive and surrounded by your children and grandchildren you will realize this truth. Heroes do one of two things; they either fade away or are dragged into the spotlight and paraded for all to see. I have never had the luxury of simply fading away. That is why I am a politician.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.” Harry said dismissively.

“What did you receive from the Goblins?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing. You gave the Goblins the right to use your votes and received nothing in return?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask why?”

“We are never going to win over any of the other races. The best we can hope for is that they stay neutral. By offering the Goblins our votes, Susan and I are trying to show that we can work with them. Maybe that will cause problems for you politically, but maybe it will make them decide to side with us. At the very least it should keep them neutral for the duration of the war. Using your same logic of looking ahead. If the public gets used to seeing the Goblins as part of the political system and the Goblins see it too, then just maybe the next rebellion won’t happen. It’s not a gift if it comes with a price tag.”

“You don’t know Goblins like I do, Harry. If you are forced to rescind your gift to them, you will guarantee the next rebellion. The idea of

something for nothing is completely foreign to their kind. Tread carefully in politics, especially with Goblins.”

“I don’t want to know them like you do. I don’t want to see the same money-grubbing dark creatures that the rest of you see. I want to give them a chance and hope they’ll give me one. Perhaps the institutional bigotry over dark creatures is affecting even your opinion. You’ve already insulted Remus because he is a werewolf and now you are saying that the Goblins don’t deserve a chance to experience a foreign idea. You seemed to support Hermione’s ideas on House Elf freedom. That seems to be a foreign idea to them. Maybe it’s time for new ideas? The old ones don’t seem to be working all that well, are they?”

“I truly would like to see your dream come to pass. You are young and idealistic. You won’t always be, but it is a good dream. I find it odd that you would question my fairness to dark creatures when you killed three of them last night, using the Unforgiveables and justifying it by a ridiculous law. It seems like something Madame Umbridge would do.”

“Don’t even go there! I killed one because it was going to kill Bill Weasley. They were my enemies and they were trying to kill me. You weren’t there you bastard! You weren’t there for Kingsley or Moody either! Where the hell were you?”

“Harry! Stop! He’s getting under your skin.” Susan said before turning to Dumbledore. “That was a cheap shot and you know it! That woman made his life a living hell and you let her do it. Here you want to see, I’ll show you.”

Susan walked over and retrieved her earlier memory and placed it back into her head. She took a deep breath as she relived the hatred of the Dursley’s again before concentrating on the memory of everyone inside Scrimgeour’s pensieve.

“It’s a memory of us being inside a ministry pensieve so it may seem a bit off, but you’ll sort it out.”

“Scrimgeour knows of this?”

“Yes apparently in our rush to leave, you neglected to tell us that the tracking and monitoring charms needed to be manually removed from our wands.”

“I did not know of the requirement. What was Scrimgeour’s opinion?”

Susan looked at him harshly, inside she was feeling guilt from her own reaction to Harry’s use of the curses. “Unlike you. He waited to see the fight before rendering an opinion. Honestly, he was more interested in Harry’s patronus then the Unforgiveables.”

“Harry’s patronus?”

“Yes Harry’s Patronus. It can kill Dementors. I thought Ms. Vance might have told you by now.”

“No, I tried to contact both her and William, but I was told she was resting and Ms. Delacour was rather protective of Mr. Weasley at the moment. May I see that as well?”

Harry walked over and asked Susan to retrieve the memory she just placed in there. He then added the memories of the patronus and the vampire fight all the way to his questioning of Coedus. He made sure to get all the cheap shots that the Vampire took at Dumbledore. “It’s in there.” He said walking back to the loveseat and refilling his glass of juice. He concentrated on rebuilding his damaged core shield and channeled his anger into the task.

After the headmaster reentered the pensieve Susan joined him and they sat there for a moment enjoying the quiet. Harry looked over at her, reached for her hand and smiled. “You were brilliant!”

“You weren’t so bad yourself. That Umbridge comment was way below the belt. I even wanted to hex him.”

“Urgh! Don’t remind me. I am trying to forget that one.”

“So, what are your plans for this evening Mr. Potter? You’ve already fought the forces of darkness, changed the political landscape and done more for Goblin relations than anyone in the last three centuries.”



"I want to have a nice long quiet dinner with you. I don't care if we have to eat it up in the attic, just the two of us. I need to get up with Tonks about training us and then I want to take a long hot bath for all my aching muscles. After that I want to go to sleep. What about you?"

"Nice plan. I am probably going to be ambushed by Hannah. I'll take you up on that quiet dinner. Then, I'll get interrogated by Hannah, again. I just barely avoided it when I borrowed her amulet. Maybe I'll offer to come scrub your back in that long hot bath, after which I will be ambushed by Hannah for the third time. I will then tell her to leave you alone, because she will want a go at you by that time."

Harry blushed at her forwardness but grinned back at her. "Maybe before dinner, you should just stun Hannah and join me in the tub. Revive her afterwards. You'll have more free time that way."

"Oh, I do like the way you think, but then Hannah would keep me up all night. She usually has to argue about something two or three times before she'll let it go."

They were still laughing when Dumbledore came out again. "I have no explanation for your new found ability. There are no records of anyone being able to kill a Dementor before. Eventually, I will ask you to demonstrate your solid patronus in front of myself and several others. We will want to see if it can be analyzed and taught. I need to arrange for the ambush tomorrow night."

"Let the Minister handle it. I gave him all the details."

"Why?"

"Because, if you or I go and capture some Death Eaters everyone will go 'There goes Potter and Dumbledore saving the day.' They need to believe that the aurors can do this. Maybe you can offer to help Scrimgeour with the ambush. It will be a chance for you two to make nice, but the people need to have some faith that the aurors can stop the Death Eaters – even if I have to gift wrap an ambush and give it to them."

"And if Tom elects to come himself?"

“Then, make sure you outnumber him! Maybe ‘by my hand’ means setting a trap, which he falls into and gets himself offed by a dozen reductor curses.”

“Perhaps. Interpretation of prophecies is a vague art at best.”

“That reminds me, you need to tell the Order at least the first two lines of the prophecy. Tom already knows that much. It might have saved Kingsley and Moody if they knew, but you know that already, don’t you? Our two best fighters in trade for Bellatrix Lestrange, I don’t think the bitch was worth it.”

Dumbledore’s mask cracked slightly, anger creeping into his eyes. “I did not think it necessary to warn people to avoid a confrontation with Tom. It seemed blatantly obvious. Despite what you think of me at this moment, I do not consider myself to be perfect. I make mistakes and people die when I do. You are already beginning to experience that as well. I will try my best to move past this error and grieve for them in the proper time. I recommend you take that lesson to heart as well, if you do intend to survive this war.” He started to walk the door and stopped to retrieve his wand. Harry cancelled the sticking charm and as Fawkes settled onto Dumbledore’s shoulder, casting Harry yet another angry phoenix glare. Picking his wand up, Dumbledore headed to the kitchen, where Molly Weasley waited for him. Harry cancelled the privacy charm.

“... must bring Percy’s wife here. She is in danger and pregnant.”

“I see.” Dumbledore turned to Harry and Susan as they came into the kitchen. “Harry, I would like to bring Penelope Clearwater-Weasley here for her protection. Do I have your permission?”

“Percy was married? I don’t have a problem with it. We may have to rearrange some sleeping arrangements. Let me ask you something, would you have asked me yesterday or just done it?”

“You already know the answer. Good evening to the both of you. Molly, take me to your daughter-in-law.”

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A few hours later Harry sat in the library. He was just finishing up a very productive talk with Tonks. She was still depressed about her inability to shift out of her aunt's form, but was somewhat happy about her assignment to train Harry and Susan. Tonks had apparated to her flat and returned with several books she wanted them to start reading. Susan fortunately already had several from her Aunt's collection of books, there were even a couple that Tonks wanted to borrow. He and Susan managed to have a private dinner in the library. They didn't need to go to the attic. Downstairs Mrs. Weasley and the rest of the Weasleys, save Bill and Charlie were making an extraordinary fuss over the arrival of Penny Weasley. Given the current ill will, Harry decided to skip that particular event. It was complete with putting a hand on the Weasley family clock for Penny, which pointed to 'Visiting Relatives'.

Harry sat in the library alone after Tonks left. Susan was no doubt being 'interrogated' by Hannah. He was managing a decent bit of reading when he noticed something he had never seen before. On the other side of the room was a door. In all the times in the library he had never recalled a door being there. The Black family crest hung on the door. Curious he walked over to the portrait of Phineas Nigellus, whom he had already spoken with earlier. He learned that the portrait of Bellatrix was correct in everything she had said. Harry made a note to retrieve one of her portrait frames and hang it somewhere where Neville wouldn't run into it.

"Sorry to bother you again, sir."

"Yes, Lord Black?" The disbelief in the portrait's voice was still there.

"That door. I have never seen it before. Where does it lead?"

"Finally noticed it have you, it is the Family Head's Sanctuary. Only someone wearing the ring can even see it. Only the head of the family can open it. I used to keep some rather useful items in there. Open the door. I can go into the frame in there and we can speak more inside."

Harry opened the door. The room inside was dusty. There was a bed in corner and a desk. There was a fireplace, a desk and several bookshelves and cabinets. Harry cast several cleaning spells in quick

succession to remove a significant amount of the dust. The ever burning torches gave the room ample lighting.

The voice of Phineas Nigellus Black came from the frame over the fireplace. The picture was a table with several empty chairs at it. The old wizard took a seat. "Welcome to the Sanctuary. The floo connection only works to the other Black Properties and only to their respective Sanctuary rooms. I would recommend visiting all of them and collecting anything you find useful."

"How come Sirius didn't say anything about this room?"

"I believe he made a vow to never wear the family ring to spite his mother. He knew about the room, but his idiotic pride got in the way. You will find books and items on the shelves. It would be best not to touch anything other than the books at this time. We can set aside some time and I can tell you what some of the items do. As you realize, these books aren't necessarily light-oriented tomes. Albus would not approve."

Harry looked at the book sitting open on the desk. The title was 'Possession – Nine Tenths of My Law' by Tarazed Black. Harry wondered if the knowledge contained in that book was what Riddle used back in the Ministry. It's not as if they hold classes on the art of possessing other living beings.

"As I told you earlier, I am less and less concerned about his approval these days. Did you ever read this book?"

"I am familiar with the contents, but you might want to speak with the picture of Tarazed."

"Will it teach me how to prevent someone from possessing me?"

"Aye, that and a whole lot more."

"Any good books on Occlumency in hear?"

"Several. Try the third shelf of the center bookcase." Harry inspected several and placed them on the table. The room was peaceful and

quiet, in stark contrast to the usual noise level currently in the household.

“Can the house elves see the room?”

“You have to allow them entrance. The same goes with anyone else, but only you can open the door.”

Harry opened the door and stepped back into the library. “Dobby.”

The elf appeared. “Harry Potter is calling Dobby?”

“You are allowed to see the Sanctuary.”

“Dobby does not understand.”

“Do you see the room behind me now?”

“Yes.”

“Would you please clean it for me and change the linens?”

“Dobby would be honored to clean the private quarters for Mr. Harry Potter.”

“Thank you Dobby.”

Harry led Dobby back into the room and watched the diminutive cyclone attack the room with a vengeance. It took less than ten minutes before the room was usable again. While Dobby cleaned away Harry looked at the Foe glasses in the room, noting that there were way too many shadowed faces silhouetted in the device. He looked over some of the other titles on the bookshelves and chose one called ‘The Light, The Dark and The Grey’ by the Faceless One. It appeared to be a compendium of offensive spells. The very first page contained a variation of the *Tres Fletchum* spell that caused the three conjured arrows to be coated in mild poison. The downside to the spell is that a simple *finite incantatum* would get rid of the poison, but the value of the spell rested in its obscurity. The second page contained a different variation, which instead of three arrows sent a single large arrow. It was called the Ballista Charm. Flipping ahead

he saw combination attacks - a spell that conjured a jet of caustic liquid and followed it with a bolt of lightning. There was the same attack he used against Riddle at Susan's house. Amelia's attack was there also. The last one that immediately caught his eye was a complex banishing spell referred to as The HOG – or Hammer of God. It took over ten seconds to cast, but was said to be able to hurl a Troll backwards, halt a charging Giant or smash the shields of unsuspecting wizards and witches to cause heinous damage. He set this book on top of the stack only to see Nigellus nodding his approval.

"One of the finest collections of combat magic you will ever see. Learn it well."

"Dobby, please move my items from my bedroom into here. I think I'll be using this chamber. Make sure to close the door when you are done." He said stepping back out into the library.

Susan entered a moment later carrying two open bottles of butterbeer. She smiled at him and took a drink. It obviously didn't go down very well as she started coughing immediately.

"You okay there."

She answered with a raspy voice, "Give me a minute."

"Looks like you have a drinking problem. I might have to cut you off."

Coughing again she muttered something he didn't catch. Harry took the bottles from her and set them down. He gave her a quick kiss.

"You changed your outfit."

"Spilled butterbeer on the other one."

Harry pulled her down onto the recliner he had been reading in earlier. It wasn't really built for two and forced her into very close proximity. He didn't mind. They kissed for a minute or two before stopping.

"So how was Hannah's interrogation?"

Susan leaned forward and whispered in his ear. "I like this interrogation better."

"Keep this up and I might just hold you to the idea of joining me in the bathtub." Harry said pleased to see her eyes widen in surprise.

She stopped and took another swig of her butterbeer and pointed at his arching her eyebrow. He shook his head. "I'd rather taste it on your lips." Then he chuckled "How's that for cheesiest line of the night?"

She smiled and they continued to kiss, their hands tracing the contours of each other's bodies. Harry closed his eyes and was enjoying the sensations. It felt a little awkward though. He couldn't put his finger on it though. It just felt different. She moaned when he kissed her neck and jumped slightly when his hands ran across the front of her shirt. Perhaps she was ashamed of her behavior down in the vault. Harry put the brakes on his activities. He took her hands in his own running his thumbs on the back of her hands.

"I'm sorry Susan. I thought ... Oh never mind I am sorry if I was being too aggressive."

She just smiled at him demurely and took another swig of butterbeer, licking her lips seductively afterwards. She set the bottle down as he touched her cheek and continued caressing her bare hand. Suddenly it hit him! She wasn't wearing either her family ring or the one from the vault. He began kissing her neck again waiting for the little gurgling growl she normally makes. Instead she gave a full moan.

"Susan, can we stop for a minute? I'm losing the feeling in my legs." He lied as she slid off of him and straightening her blouse and skirt. Harry stood and stretched his legs walking over to the bookshelves. He needed to prove his suspicions.

"Susan, you said that you and Hannah researched the End of the Line clauses. Did you ever run across the Heir Compulsion?"

She took another drink and coughed again. "Sorry." She got out thumping her chest. "We didn't see much on that one. I'm not sure. Maybe we can ask the headmaster."

His fears were confirmed. This was not Susan. His list of suspects was one, Ginny. He felt his anger rising.

“Oh okay. Seems you knew the answer a few hours ago, though.” He said watching the look of panic cross her face when he pulled his wand on her.

“Uh.” She stammered.

“Knock it off, Ginny. I know you’re not Susan.”

“I ...” She looked at a loss for words to say.

“Why? That’s all I want to know. Well that and what’s in the butterbeer?”

Her head hung in defeat. “It’s a love potion.”

“Dammit! Why?” He said vanishing the bottle. He waved his wand and cast a privacy charm on the doors.

“Because I should be the one, not her!” Ginny/Susan looked back at him fiercely. “I’m the one that’s held a thing for you all these years. I’m the one you should be with. We’re supposed to be together. I want you!”

“Where’s my choice in this? Don’t I get any say?”

“Fine! Why her? Why not me?” It was strange to see the normally collected form of Susan Bones showing the trademark Weasley temper.

“You really want to know? All right, I’ll tell you. She’s ready for this and you aren’t!”

“What do you mean by that?” She yelled back at him.

“It means. People are going to be dying. You couldn’t handle Percy’s death and you have hardly seen him in a year. I can’t give you the kind of support you need. I don’t have it and it may sound selfish, but I can’t spare it either!”



"I can too handle it. Did you forget who was with you at the Ministry?"

"No, I didn't forget. I also seem to recall you've known about my marriage clause for a while now. You could have told me but you didn't! Both you and Hermione were out there planning my wedding to you. You only started talking to me during the tournament. I don't even know you that well."

"But you know Susan so well." She said sarcastically.

"I know everything I need to know about Susan! She's not talking about how she is chatting up Dean. She's not using fucking polyjuice and trying to slip me a love potion! I don't want your games Ginny! I don't have time for it! Susan doesn't play these games. So if you won't accept my earlier reason, accept that one! *Petrificus Totalus!*"

Harry paralyzed her angry at yet again someone trying to deny his right to choose anything. He used the *mobilicorpus* spell again and floated her out the door and down the steps into the kitchen, where most everyone was gathered.

Ron looked up, "Harry, what's going on? Is Susan alright?"

"Let's find out." Harry responded dropping Ginny/Susan onto the floor. "Sonorous! Will everyone in the house please come to the kitchen!"

Within a minute everyone came down the steps. The last group down was Hermione, Hannah and Susan. Susan stopped when she saw her double lying on her side on the floor. Everyone else looked around in shock.

"We seem to have an extra Susan in the house. No wait a minute, we're missing someone. Who could it be? Oh I know, where's Ginny?" Everyone looked between the two Susan's as the one still moving's face became angrier and angrier.

"She didn't! She didn't! Let me go! I'll hex that bitch!" Susan screamed struggling against both Hannah and Hermione who had grabbed a hold of her.

"What's this about Harry?" Arthur Weasley said.

"It's about her trying to slip me a love potion." Harry answered turning his glare to Fred and George. One of them looked shocked and the other simply looked away. "And now we know who gave it to her."

Ron looked appalled, but tried to be a peacemaker. "Calm down Harry. Let's sort this all out."

"No Ron. There's nothing to sort out. She couldn't accept the fact that Susan and I are together and decided to try and trick me into getting into bed with her. Hermione, tell me the truth. You and her looked up what the heir compulsion means didn't you?"

"We did Harry, but I didn't know anything about this. Ginny asked me to have a talk with Susan and that's what Hannah and I were doing."

"I don't know what to believe anymore, but I'll accept your word on it unless I learn otherwise."

Lisa Turpin spoke up, "I don't understand Harry. So she sleeps with you. What could she possibly gain?"

"The heir compulsion would start drawing the two of us together after we slept together. How did you explain it, Susan?"

"Our magical auras would start tuning to each other making us more compatible. We'd feel a natural attraction like a weak love potion." The physically restrained girl practically spit out glaring at her magically restrained counterpart.

Arthur Weasley's voice broke the silence. "I never thought I would say these words, but I am ashamed of my daughter. If you want us to leave Harry, we will be gone before morning."

Harry paused. What did he want? He wasn't sure. "I don't know. Part of me wants to toss her out, but with the Death Eaters out there it seems wrong. What do you want to do?"

"I want to speak with my daughter in private. I was willing to excuse her behavior this morning when we learned of Percy's loss, but I cannot and will not excuse this. Professor Dumbledore says that Hogwarts will be ready in a week's time. She will be confined to her

room until then except to go to the bathroom. Her meals will be brought to her and I will take her wand until we leave for the castle. Is that acceptable?"

Harry thought for a moment. He looked at the real Susan. "If Susan agrees that it's acceptable, then I'll accept it."

"Go ahead and free her, Harry" Susan said shaking herself free from Hannah and Hermione's grasp. Harry complied and Ginny slowly got to her feet, looking at the ground not willing to meet anyone's eyes. Susan stepped forward. "Look at me, Weasley."

The moment Ginny raised her eyes; Susan's fist hit her right solidly in the cheek. Ginny collapsed back on to the ground and clutched at her polyjuiced face. The impression of the Bones family ring was now temporarily transferred to her face.

"Now it's acceptable!" Susan said wheeling around and heading back up the steps.

In all the fuss of Ginny being marched into the parlor by Arthur and Molly Weasley and the general chaos that ensued, no one noticed the predatory smile on the face of Penelope Clearwater-Weasley.

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## Chapter 16 – Penny for your thoughts

Harry lay in his new bed in the Sanctuary room staring at the ceiling. He didn't want to move too much. Susan was a light sleeper and they were still getting used to each other's physical presence, both in sexual and non-sexual ways. The past week was a blur. Most everyone was leaving for Hogwart's tomorrow after Harry's birthday party. He and Susan would finally have a chance to be alone. Dumbledore had politely asked that they come and Harry politely declined asking to wait an additional week and not work on occlumency, spells and physical training, but to work on his and Susan's relationship. He wanted to get to the Room of Requirement to start practicing dueling, but he felt this was more important.

He still ached from his workouts with Tonks. Thank the powers for all his quidditch training! He was in decent shape. Susan muttered some very interesting descriptions of the training regimen. Still each day she dragged herself out to work with him and Tonks. She tried her level best to keep up with him and it showed in the aches, pains and bruises. Harry was always careful to compliment her progress. You couldn't fault her work ethic, but she wasn't physically or magically on his level. There had been several instances where she had gotten very down on herself.

Harry found ways of helping her out of her depression. Their first time was the night Ginny tried to claim him. It was awkward and uncomfortable and their lack of experience showed. Fortunately like most physical activities, they were getting better with practice. He had to admit that it was definitely getting more fun and it was now a serious contender to overtake quidditch as his favorite recreational activity.

The ambush had gone over well. Parkinson and two others were captured. Nott was killed. Two others managed to escape, probably to face the wrath of Tom. The best news was that no Aurors had been injured. The Prophet proclaimed it a major victory. It even managed to drive his name off the front page for a couple of days. Of course, Rita had to mention the ring! She did it in her usual insinuating fashion. He learned a bit of disturbing news, the trial of the

two Death Eaters from Susan's house finally took place. One of them was Marilyn Higgs, mother of Terry Higgs.

He felt Susan shift next to him. He noticed the change in her breathing patterns. She was awake. She stretched and rolled over to face him.

"Can't sleep?" She asked.

"No, too much to think about. How about you?"

"I keep waking up. I am so sore from all the workouts. Thank Circe we get a break today and that we are only going to go half days for the next week."

"You're doing great though. Where's it hurt?"

"My calves and lower back."

"Do you want a pain numbing charm or a massage? It's already five AM. I don't think we'll be able to go back to sleep."

"How about the charm and then a massage?" She smiled coyly at him.

"Sheesh, you'd think it was your birthday." Harry said grabbing his wand and applying the numbing charm where she had requested it.

Susan climbed on top of him slowly. Her long hair fell loosely cascading around the both of their faces when she leaned in to kiss him. Free of the plait she normally wore, Harry realized just how much hair Susan had as she straddled him, grinding on him playfully.

"Well birthday boy, do you want to unwrap your present now or wait for later?" Susan asked as she placed his hands on the fabric of one of his own undershirts that Susan had confiscated and decided was her new sleepwear. When he questioned her, she offered him her underwear to sleep in if he so desired. He politely declined. Harry had to admit, it looked much better on her than it ever did on him. "I still get to give you your birthday spanking later, regardless."

Harry ignored the memories of previous birthday spankings administered by his cousin. The only real acknowledgement he had ever had before age eleven. Of course it wasn't his birthday, Dudley simply decided to use that excuse to beat him. When Vernon caught Dudley with the table tennis paddle, he simply shook his head and dragged Dudley out to the garage. For a brief shining moment, eight-year old Harry Potter entertained the idea that Dudley was about to finally get what he deserved. Sadly, Vernon simply showed Dudley how to drill holes in the paddle to lessen the wind resistance and make the paddle hit harder.

"I think I'll unwrap my present now. Tonks did say we should engage in some physical activity today. Nothing like getting an early start to our exercise." He said tugging the fabric upwards. Susan grabbed his wand and performed a contraception charm. The protection charm was actually more effective if the witch used the wizard's wand instead of her own. It was, of course, one of the things the heir compulsion would eventually negate. At least one side benefit was that she would be able to wield Harry's wand nearly as well as her own and vice versa. Harry had already asked Dumbledore to see if Fawkes would provide a feather for a wand for Susan. They were awaiting the answer from the temperamental bird and its keeper.

When Susan questioned this, they finally started watching Harry's memories. She had seen the first four years already and understood his idea when she saw the fight in the graveyard and the brother wand effect. She caught her breath when she saw Cedric Diggory die. She knew it was coming, but it just had such a tragic randomness to it. The memories of the Department of Mysteries were in the pensieve waiting for her, but she had dragged Harry to bed after they watched the tournament and did her best to remind him that life is precious and should be celebrated.

Sometimes they would just stare into each other's eyes, as they were intimate. For Susan, she felt like she was searching to make a connection on a level beyond both the physical and emotional. They had talked about it and she had admitted as much to Harry. When she pressed him for what he was thinking during these moments, he simply said that it was an incredible turn on staring at her like that. It was an honest answer, but probably not his best choice of words. He

had to elaborate, struggling to explain how it turned him on before she would accept his faux pas. Thus began Harry Potter's education on the importance of carefully answering a woman's questions.

It was both amusing and embarrassing during one of the first couple of times, when they entered the protected room and began attacking each other as young lovers often do that there was a pounding on the wall after less than a minute. Harry quickly pulled on his shirt and opened the door stepping back out into the library to face a flushed and angry looking Hannah Abbott, who not so politely reminded the two of them that she is a **receiving empath** and if they are going to 'make like bunnies' to kindly give her a sign so that she can leave the adjacent room. The many people still in the library roared with laughter. Susan and Hannah couldn't look at each other for the next day without blushing.

It was during this week that Remus Lupin had worked hard on making amends to Harry. He was teaching both Harry and Susan how to apparate. Several others including Hermione, the three Ravenclaws, and surprisingly Ron sat in on his lectures in the library. By the end of the day Harry was known as Harry "The Stump" Potter from his first splinching which left both legs from the knees down on the other side of the library. Remus told him that it was actually a good sign that he was able to do that so quickly, as Harry endured the mildly traumatic experience of having your limbs reattached. Susan managed her first splinching incident on day two, leaving a hand behind. Harry kept her distracted during the reversal by telling her how much he needed that hand.

Hermione sought out Harry after the second day. She felt the need to clear the air between the two of them. Apparently, there was more in the air than Ms. Granger had bargained for. It failed miserably. The result was an argument that ranked up there with some of the all time Ron and Hermione arguments. She returned for the next day's apparition lesson, but glared daggers at Harry. In an unusually humorous twist, well at least it was humorous for everyone not directly involved; Ron tried to be the peacemaker between the two. His bumbling attempts to get the two talking ultimately worked mostly because both Harry and Hermione both agreed that Ron was humiliating himself. They both realized that their friendship was

damaged, but could be repaired. Ginny was still a sore point between the two. After Susan had moved in with Harry, Mandy had taken the opportunity to move downstairs with Hannah, Chelsea and Lisa. This had left Hermione alone with Ginny. Hermione's biggest error during the initial 'air cleaning' was to attempt to justify Ginny's behavior to Harry. His retort would be repeated endlessly once school started again and quoted often. Even once by Professor Vector, who used the line to break up a particularly long-winded reply by Hermione. The normally stiff and boring instructor had his students including Hermione laughing so hard they were crying.

"Hermione, you stupid bitch, can you smell the shit you are trying to shovel?"

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During all this time, Ginny was pretty much alone and dejected. There were only two people outside of her parents who even bothered to come and talk to her, Hermione and Penelope. Hermione scolded her for her rash action, but claimed to understand the intent behind Ginny's motivations. Penny on the other hand, was completely supportive. The only Weasley daughter identified with the only Weasley daughter-in-law. Penny professed that she didn't know how to act around anyone else and Ginny thanked her for being a sympathetic ear. It was easy to talk to Penny. The former Ravenclaw had a relaxed air about her and she encouraged Ginny to talk through all her problems. She always came up with a spot of tea and some pastries when Hermione was listening in on the apparition lessons.

"Ginny, if it's not too much of an imposition, tell me about all your adventures. I don't know Harry all that well and it might help you put your feelings into perspective. You may have been reacting subconsciously to the debt I hear you owe Harry."

"What do you mean?" The young witch asked.

"Well from what little I know about Wizard and Witch's debts, it can cause you to act on what you think is best for the person you owe. Take your case for example. You find out Harry must be married in a year and subconsciously you evaluate all his options. You come to the conclusion that he would do best with you and the debt causes



you to act out of character to do what you consider to be 'best for Harry'."

"So what you are saying is that my life debt to him caused all this?"

"Well it's just a theory mind you, but you don't seem the type to run around doing all this for no reason." Penny answered knowing that it could be possible, but it was most likely just the actions of a young teenaged girl who had been scorned by her one time hero. Ginny was such a wonderful resource for information and they talked for hours covering all of Ginny's years in Hogwarts and her observations and stories about Harry Potter and the many other people who inhabited this house.

Each night Penny would spend an hour or so with her mother-in-law talking about her dear Percival. By the end of that time, both women would be in tears and Penny would go up into the attic for a private cry. Molly asked that no one pester Penny as she dealt with her grief. Inside Molly was proud of her new daughter. She was such a strong girl and would make a wonderful mother. Molly broke into tears when Penny asked for some parchment and a quill to write letters to Percy so that "Wherever he is, he knows how the baby and I are doing? It's therapeutic and I'll save them for when the baby is older."

Penny sat in the attic that smelled of Hippogriff. The stench had managed to make it into her clothes, but it was the one place in the house where she was guaranteed to have a bit of privacy. Her mother-in-law had convinced her hen pecked husband to bring a comfortable chair and writing desk up into the attic for Penny's use.

*Dear Father,*

*Tomorrow is Potter's birthday. I will need to make my move then. First I will convince one of the idiot twins to take me to my flat yet again to collect some more personal items, while the fool is distracted looking at my underwear drawers, I will send this off with Hermes. I have learned the following things that may be of use to our cause.*

*The Weasley girl is emotionally unstable. She is possible recruitment material.*

*Potter and his fiancé stay in a hidden room off the library on the third floor. The ward is like nothing I have ever encountered before. If I had to guess it is probably blood magic based. The Prophet reported correctly that they are in fact engaged.*

*Potter and Bones are being taught how to apparate. Both have successfully done small distances, but neither has tried a long distance apparition. They are also receiving combat training from an auror named Tonks. It seems to be physical training followed by spell casting training. Both are usually exhausted by the end of the day. If you do manage to access this local, early evening would probably be the best time to attack.*

*According to the Weasley girl, she suspects that Potter knows the entire prophecy. He has not shared this with anyone to her knowledge, but I suspect he has told Bones.*

*All of us save Potter and Bones are to be moved to Hogwarts and stay in the Ravenclaw tower until the start of the school term. The Longbottom boy is still alive and is here as well. If my cover is not blown by my actions tomorrow evening, I will await your instruction on how to deal with him. Potter and Bones intend to remain at this location for an additional week.*

*The blonde girl at the Department of Mysteries was Luna Lovegood. She is currently in Sweden hunting fictional beasts with her mentally unbalanced father. One of Godfather's servants may be able to capture them if he or she were to head into that region and spread a tale of seeing something called a Snorkack. I suppose whoever goes would need to read that rag to understand what the hell I am talking about.*

*One of the vampires, probably the one from the Italy, but I cannot say for certain was the betrayer. He gave Potter and Dumbledore the location of the rendezvous and they passed it on to the Ministry. That is where the leak came from if you do not already know.*

*Granger's pet is part kneazle. I have been doing my utmost to prevent arousing it's suspicions. The Abbott sisters are partial empaths. I am also attempting to avoid lengthy contact with them.*

*I don't know how you can use this information, but it seems very important. Potter and Dumbledore are at odds with each other and are not very pleased by the others actions. I get the feeling that they are working with the Ministry as a result of Potter's actions rather than anything Dumbledore initiated. Dumbledore's organization appears ready to fracture into two factions. I will keep an ear to the ground to determine who may fall on the two sides.*

*The Animagus Podmore is here and his family is still out of the country. They were contacted and asked to remain so for the near future. He has been helping the students with transfiguration and has promised Potter a chance to work on becoming an Animagus himself. He, Tonks, and Mother Weasley are usually the ones here full time. Hestia Jones, a man named Dodge and another named Diggle alternate in the evenings. Various Weasleys are here at different times during the day and night.*

*Much of Godfather's political troubles were caused by Narcissa Black, formerly Malfoy. They received a communication that she is traveling with yet another Weasley spawn and recently left the coast of Portugal. There was no indication where they were headed and they were purposefully being vague about their travel plans.*

*That is all I can think of. Your grandchild is getting bigger. At Hogwarts next week, I will have the nurse attempt to sex the child. I am feeling little flutters right now and expect the little one to start kicking soon. Mother Weasley agrees with me. Please send my warmest regards to my Godfather. I should go now before the simpletons get suspicious. They could really use more Ravenclaws or Slytherins in their organization. There are far too many Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors for my liking, but their stupidity virtually assures victory.*

*Love,*

*Penny*

Penny carefully folded her letter and put it into the pocket of the robes she was wearing. She had already sent an earlier letter, which had some of the more general points, such as the identities of every adult who had been around for an Order meeting. Penny's membership in

the Order had been declined after Molly pointed out her pregnancy. Molly assured her that after the child was born, if she was still interested, Molly would then support Penny's membership. Though the implication was that Penny's commitment to the child should outweigh her joining the fight. The shrill hag had made her job more difficult, but indirectly that had led her to have her first of many conversations with Ginny Weasley. Having suffered through dating and eventual marriage to one of them, Penny was well versed in the methods of manipulating a Weasley. Penny had spent long hours talking with her husband about how the family worked. Percy's opinion of Ginny had been that she had much potential, but would no doubt be side-tracked by the twins. Percy implied that Mother Hag doted on her only daughter and was convinced that her being the only female in so many generations that she was destined for greatness. She remembered some of those specials from the BBC that she watched with her mother about the child models and the mothers that pushed them. Mother Hag was probably unconsciously trying to live vicariously through her daughter.

Using all this, Penny was able to push Ginny's buttons playing on her anger at her parent's punishment, her guilt at actually resorting to a love potion. Truth be told, Penny did not know whether it was guilt at trying it, or guilt at being caught. Penny was able to give Ginny a focus for her anger and resentment. It was too easy.

She started back down the steps glad to be out of the foul smelling attic and headed downstairs to arrange for one of the other spawn to accompany her back to her flat tomorrow.

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Harry and Susan made their way down to breakfast around seven thirty. They smiled at Hermione and Lisa who were already eating. Harry went over to fix their plates while Susan sat down and poured them both juice. Noticing Hermione's stupid grin Susan had to ask.

"What in the name of Merlin are you smiling at?"

"You and Harry. You're good for him."

"And how exactly did you determine this?"

“His smile. Your smile. The way you both behave towards each other. It’s sweet.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s also in direct contrast to how Hermione and Ron act around each other.” Lisa decided to add in.

Susan chuckled as Hermione shot Lisa a mock death glare. “Well, Hermione’s relationship positively reeks of unresolved sexual tension.”

“Susan!” The glare of death and embarrassment turned on her as Lisa began laughing so hard her face turned red.

“What?”

“Just because you and Harry are, doesn’t mean everyone should!”

Lisa was now gasping for breath, “Please stop! Stomach hurts!”

Harry returned to the table seeing after hearing Lisa’s gasps and saw a blushing Hermione and Susan. “Did I miss something?”

Hermione timed her reply as Susan took a long drink of her juice. “No, apparently I am the one that is missing something.” She deadpanned causing Susan to spew juice on Harry and a new round of howling from Lisa Turpin who was now thumping the table with her fist.

Harry simply shook his head and sat down. He summoned a towel from the counter and wiped himself off. He patted Susan on the back as she coughed after inhaling some of the juice.

Susan attempted to change the topic. “So Lisa, who have you got your eyes on these days?”

“I had been thinking about asking Neville out.” She said much to everyone’s surprise.

“Really!”

“Yeah, but then I found out he is pretty serious about Luna Lovegood. I don’t want to interfere with that.”

“Seriously?”

“According to Kevin, he and Neville had been spending a lot of time together lately. I had my little bro scout him out. Cost me my last four chocolate frogs, but it saved me some embarrassment. I think Chelsea might be after him too. In summary, my prospects don’t look like they are going to improve until September. The Claws in my year are all involved with someone already. Any good ones in your houses?”

Harry made it a point to avoid the conversation as Susan and Hermione debated the merits of other males in the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor. There was a pause when Hermione asked whom Lisa went to the Yule ball with. The table grew rather quiet when she answered Tony Goldstein. Seeing the looks of horror on their face Lisa quickly explained that she and Tony went only as friends and never really dated. She missed him terribly, but they weren’t soul mates or anything.

“Oh before I forget, Harry. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks Hermione.”

“Looking forward to the party.”

“It will be nice to see some of the faces, Remus told me yesterday that Hagrid is back in town and will probably be here today. I spoke with Bill. He and Fleur are coming. Most of the Order who are able will probably stop by, if for no other reason than to help the move to Hogwarts. If I’m lucky, it will be a Snape free day. How’s the Occlumency going for you three?” Harry said knowing the headaches Susan had been complaining about.

“Chelsea’s actually a better teacher than Hannah. She has a better grasp of the material. Hannah learned out of necessity. Chelsea learned for the fun of it. I’m having a good time.” Lisa answered.

"You're probably doing well because you have an organized mind." Hermione added in. "The exercises are helping me regain my strength." One of the items that came out of Harry and Hermione's argument earlier this week was that Dolohov's near fatal spell had damaged Hermione rather badly. Her unwillingness to admit it led to the ugly scene when Harry asked her to come fight the Dementors. She finally admitted it two days ago when their first Occlumency lessons began. Harry had apologized for being so harsh with her, but told her most of their argument could have been avoided if she just admitted it that night. The school nurse asked that she wait at least one more week before she started using magic again. By conserving her magic and allowing it to help heal her, Hermione would make a full recovery before the term begins.

Susan sighed, "Apparently, my mind isn't so organized. I'm having an awful time of it."

Harry tried to reassure her, "Then again, it's not like you're busy or anything. Lets see, apparation lessons, physical training, advanced spell casting and when you are finished you get to have Occlumency lessons. No cause for being a bit scatterbrained at all." Harry didn't even mention the spells they tried out of the books in their hidden sanctuary.

"You seem to be keeping up. I'm pretty much useless by the second hour working with Tonks."

"What can I say? All that time on the pitch is finally paying off. It's only been a week. You're getting stronger both magically and physically every day. Just give it time."

Susan smiled at his encouragement. "You won't say I'm the weak link will you."

"You motivate me to train harder. Nothing weak about that."

Their conversation was interrupted by Ron coming down the stairs and clapping him on the back. "Morning, mate. Happy One Six. If you're looking for a birthday wish to use, I was thinking about the Cannons and the league championship."

“Please Ron if I was truly getting a wish, I don’t think that’s the one I would use. Besides Ollie is on Puddlemere, I can’t abandon an old teammate like that can I?” Ron really wasn’t listening to him as he filled his plate with a very large helping and sat down next to Hermione giving her a quick peck on the cheek before starting to devour the food in front of him.

“If only he would attack his schoolwork like that.” Harry said in a tone that sounded very Hermione like eliciting a few chuckles from everyone.

The real Hermione came to her boyfriend’s defense. “Actually, Ronald has completed all his summer assignments and is taking very detailed notes during Professor Lupin’s lessons.” Ron put a big smile on his face and continued chewing. His girlfriend’s obvious pride in his hard work was a nice reward. Most everyone now considered Ron ‘officially whipped’.

“Anything useful in that thing they call a newspaper?” Harry asked Lisa.

“Oh, for a change nothing about you the front page. Must be disappointing? It’s mostly Wizengamot stuff. There’s an article about an escaped dragon from one of the preserves. There were a couple of Dementor sightings. Lets see, the first mention of you is on page 5 in the sports section, where they are debating if you’ll go pro and where you would be drafted. They predicted if you came out in this year’s draft you’d go sixth to The Tornados. Do you think the Headmaster will have our OWL results finally?”

Hermione responded, with a hint of frustration in her voice. “We should have already had them if not for all the turmoil at the Ministry. Hopefully, we’ll get them soon enough to get our books for the next term.”

“Wonder if Snape will let people without an Outstanding into his NEWT class?” Ron asked between mouthfuls. Dating had also apparently reigned in his troll-like table manners.

Harry took a moment before answering, “You know something, I don’t care. The main reason I wanted to be an Auror was to fight. I’m going



to fight anyway. Susan mentioned that I should talk to real Aurors and so I have been talking with Tonks a lot. She hates the amount of paperwork she has to do. If I am eligible, I'll probably take it. If not, I won't lose too much sleep."

"Plus, we could hire a private tutor for potions next summer and right after we graduate and take the NEWT during the summer after graduation." Susan chipped in.

"Really?" Harry asked having never thought of it before.

"Of course, silly. A NEWT in potions is required for many job fields; Healer, Auror, Potion brewers, and Dangerous animal handlers to name a few. I'd guess a whole cottage industry has grown up around how poorly Snape teaches potions. If you don't want to take his class Harry, then don't." Susan answered firmly.

Lisa looked up from her paper. "He's basically the best thing that has ever happened to private tutors and correspondence programs. Well between him and Binns."

The floo roared to life and Emmeline Vance stepped out. She smiled to everyone and carried several packages. "I've got some presents from your admirers."

"Who's sending gifts?"

"Well this big one is from the Minister. He had Lavender bring it by. Lav's all excited. She may not go back to school this year. She's on full time at Auror HQ now, in charge of the backshift floo operators. She wants me to ask the Headmaster about attending only morning classes. She also sent a box for you, Harry. It sounds like chocolate frogs. The last one is from Bill and me. We chipped in to get you something."

"Wow, sounds like she is really happy about the job. You guys didn't have to get me anything."

"Oh hush and enjoy your birthday. I think that she feels it is her contribution, without doing and I quote 'the whole messy fighting thing'."

Everyone got a good laugh at that. Harry actually remembered that Lavender wasn't that bad. She was actually a fairly competent spell caster. She outclassed Parvati by leaps and bounds. Harry would even notice that she would hold back a bit when dueling with her best friend, another of those people that frustrated Hermione, by not applying themselves.

While they were talking one of the twins popped in through the floo. He smiled and waved. "Have any of you seen the latest addition to family Weasley? Mum asked me to meet her here in the morning and escort her back to her place for a few items."

"She went into the loo, when I came out. So, I know she's up." Ron answered.

Within five minutes Penny came back downstairs and apologized for holding George up. Emmeline begged off saying she would try to get back for the party. Harry and Susan split up. He decided to go back to Sanctuary and do some reading and Susan decided to go annoy those 'late sleeping Abbott sisters'.

Three hours later, Susan came and fetched him from their private room for Remus' lesson. He showed her some of the combat spells he had just been reading over and planned to practice when they could finally use a dueling chamber. Many of the things Tonks was trying to teach them required lots of space that just wasn't available at the home. He had been tempted to use the private floo and go to one of the lesser known Black properties that had plenty of room, but in the end decided against it. No one other than Dobby had been allowed into the Sanctuary room. They explained it away by saying that you had to be wearing a Black family ring and what not. Fortunately, Tonks never asked to see it, as she actually was a Black family member. Harry and Susan agreed that the private stash of tomes in this room should remain their secret.

Phineas Nigellus Black had been very helpful at identifying all the artifacts on the shelves. Many of which could only be classified as Dark Items. There was a necklace of ensnarement, binding the wearer to the one whose blood was shed onto the chain. There were three poisonous knives including one that dripped silver instead of

poison. It required that a silver coin be placed in the handle and was supposed to be extremely useful against werewolves. The one item that really struck his fancy was a crossbow that was permanently disillusioned to all those not wearing a Black family ring. It fired bolts that were coated in paralytic venom. Harry hoped that he could talk Hagrid into teaching him how to correctly fire a crossbow. Other things included cursed books that the reader could not stop reading, candles that would shoot jets of fire in random directions attempting to set a house on fire and a quilt that would act just like a lethifold and kill the unfortunate person by dissolving their body.

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Penny arrived back to headquarters through the floo. Apparition was no longer recommended past the first trimester according to the latest 'Magical Mommy and Me'. She was slightly nauseous, though she did not know if it was from the baby or her present company. She hadn't cared for either of the twins much when she was at Hogwarts. Now, she was actively contemplating their deaths. 'Father would be proud. Merlin! If it wasn't bad enough to have been married to Anal Retentive Weasley. They were like the damn seven dwarfs from that fairy tale her mother and father, well actually the man who thought he was her father, used to read.'

It was only yesterday when she could actually manage to get by Mother Hag without being enveloped in the hug of a desperate woman. No matter how hard Molly Weasley hugged her it wasn't going to bring her precious Percy back. Penny's godfather made sure of that. Percy had always held his mother up as some kind of gold standard of parenting. Penny's week here had gotten rid of those illusions. She smothered her children until they either no longer cared, or openly rebelled. It seemed the Cursebreaker and the Dragon Handler set the tone for just going along with their mother until they were of age and then doing whatever they wanted. The twins opted for an early rebellion. The youngest boy at least had enough brainpower to latch on to a smart witch. He'll go as far as Granger's repeated kicks in his ass will take him. Finally, there was her witless helper, Ginny. The girl was so stunted by her obsessions and smothered in attention that she ought to hit puberty around age thirty, provided she eludes Darwin's theories that long. Penny had never

met someone who seemed that desperate for validation. She hadn't even resorted to using the fact that Ginny was indirectly responsible for Penny being petrified. Toss a couple more obstacles in the little bitch's way and she'll probably snap and become this generation's version of Bellatrix.

'Hooray for the first Weasley girl in a century! Gee, do you think there was a reason that they stopped making them for awhile.' She thought as she worked her way back to her room. The items she picked up were mostly worthless and could easily be abandoned when she port keyed Potter out of here during his own birthday party. Both father and godfather thought it was delicious irony. She had just the item to use as the portkey, Percy's Headboy badge. She placed it into the gift box and cast the portkey creation spell on it. Looking in the mirror, she scrunched her face up into a pained expression.

"It was his most prized memento. I just know he would want you to have it, Harry." She then laughed in the mirror.

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Harry sat in his chair in the center of the room, wearing the birthday boy hat that everyone insisted he and Neville wear. Neville looked as uncomfortable as he was. Chelsea Abbott was chatting with him livening up Neville's mood. They shot each other competing looks of dissatisfaction and then chuckled at their misfortune.

"Oh, do look like you are trying to enjoy yourself Mr. Grumpy." Susan said coming up behind him with Hannah.

"Why is it that everyone stops wearing the pointy hats after their first year?" Harry asked to no one in particular.

"I think it looks brilliant."

"I'm glad you do, because your birthday is in September while school is in session." Harry added watching Susan's eyes grow wide in shock. Hannah smiled brightly.

"Hey Hermione's is in September too!" Ron added earning a smack.

"I most certainly will not wear that at school!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Of course you won't Mione, that one says birthday boy. We have to get you one that says birthday girl." Ron added pausing between the two sentences to offer her a glimmer of hope. "I bet Fred and George could make up a special one just for you. It will be great. I can see it now. It will be pink with lots of frilly things."

Hermione's face was a mask of annoyance. Susan didn't look all that pleased either, but both Harry and Neville were smiling now.

Harry looked over at Hagrid and Remus Lupin who had entered the house from the street. Both men looked tired; Hagrid's entire left arm was wrapped up in bandages. Harry rose to greet the half giant and was crushed into a powerful hug. After many years it was not too difficult to understand the man's butchering of the English language.

"Good to see you, Harry! I hope your having a happy birthday."

"What happened to your arm?"

"Nothing to worry about, just a little reminder of my latest trip to see the Giants. Ran into some not-so friendly critters out there."

"Is Madam Maxine okay?"

"Oh, Olympè is just fine. She's back in France resting and getting her strength back."

"The Giants are going to help him aren't they?"

"Won't lie to you Harry, it doesn't look good. They're a proud and violent people. Don't reckon anything the new Minister can do will make a difference."

"What's the best way to fight one?"

"Well, I'm not the best one to ask on that. I usually end up going toe to toe with them. Olympè, she's the smart one. She goes after their eyes first. Their skins too thick for most cutters and whatnot, but a really strong lad like you could do some damage. It takes like six or

eight stunners to bring one down. Anyway, Olympè, she blinds ‘em first then throws a binder around their legs and trips ‘em. You get one on the ground in front of you and you hit it in the head with your most powerful stuff. That usually does the trick. If you’re fighting more than one, well unless you got a whole heap of help, you best be running.”

“Makes sense, hope I’ll never have to use your advice though.”

“So what are you bringing into class with you this year?”

“I might not be there for the start of the term, Harry. There’s things to be done and people that need watching. Mrs. Grubbly-Plank will be there though and she is one fine animal handler. Now what’s this I hear about you getting engaged? Who is the lucky lady?”

“That would be Susan right here and I’m the lucky one.” Harry answered earning a smile from Susan.

“You take good care of him Susan. You don’t run across men like Harry everyday.”

Susan smiled at her teacher. She really never got into the spirit of handling dangerous creatures and preferred the substitute’s more benign selection of magical beasts. She vividly remembered having to get her trademark hair regrown after a particularly nasty encounter with a blast-end skrewt in her fourth year.

“I will Professor. Harry is my number one priority.” She answered making Harry’s face redden a bit.

“Oh before I forget, go ahead and open mine and Olympè’s present.” Hagrid said handing Harry a box wrapped crudely in plain brown paper. Harry was relieved that it didn’t feel alive.

“Thanks Hagrid.” Harry said removing the wrapping. Inside there was a box with a crest on it. When he questioned Hagrid, the half-giant told him that was Madam Maxine’s family crest. Opening it there was an amulet on a thick rope. The disc was made of gold and had a series of redish runes hammered into it. It was heavier than it looked.

“It’s a giant’s blood amulet, Harry. It’s been in Olympè’s family for generations. Wear it and it will take more than just one stunner to bring you down.”

Harry was open mouthed as he put the heavy amulet around his neck, “Thank you Hagrid. It’s fantastic.”

“I figured you could use it more than another batch of rock cakes.”

Harry didn’t say anything as he thanked Hagrid yet again. He wanted to make a joke that rock cakes could be banished at your enemies and cause a surprising amount of damage, but the joke just felt wrong. Instead he accepted yet another bone jarring hug from the man that introduced him to the wizarding world.

“Well, I reckon I ought to go over and say hello to our other birthday boy.” Hagrid said moving picking up a box that moved slightly. Harry watched as Hagrid greeted Neville and handed him the box containing a replacement toad for Trevor, who was yet another victim of the Death Eater massacre. Harry was distracted from the proceedings by Dobby tugging on his shirt. The small elf motioned for him to follow as they headed upstairs.

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Penny was getting nervous. She wasn’t nearly that nervous when Percy on the night of his death. Then again, she was in the company of the most powerful man on this planet and Percy had no wand. Here, she was in a house full of enemies alone and pregnant. She would make her father and godfather proud of her.

She finished rewrapping the gift. The first time her hands shook too much and it looked rather poor. She considered just leaving it as is and chalking it up to her emotional distress over Percy’s death and that she felt that she shouldn’t be celebrating anything right now. These people were so easy. Besides, her father wanted her to be a consummate professional and this was no time for a bout of anxiety. She grabbed her few important things, including a couple of very nice books she had discovered in the Black Family Library and tossed them into a bag, before casting a shrinking charm on the bag and dropping it in her pocket. She looked around the room one last time

for anything she had forgotten and started to make her way out of the room.

They were already unwrapping presents when she came down the stairs. Potter and Longbottom were seated at the table with various boxes around them. The inhabitants of the house made sure that the Longbottom boy had an ample supply of presents even though half the adults barely knew him. Penny planned her approach carefully, get the portkey into his hands, activate it and grab onto him. Her success or failure would depend on the next minute.

Instantly, Molly was by her side. "Penny dear, are you feeling up to a party? I know it's hard to find reasons to celebrate, but it's important to try."

"I'm fine Molly, really. I've got a bit of indigestion, but other than that I think I need a change of scenery." Penny failed to mention exactly how much of a scenery change she needed.

"Well let me know if I can get you something. Most of my pregnancies weren't hard on my stomach. Though with the twins, I ate a terrible amount of chicken broth. It should have been a warning to me how much trouble they were going to be." Penny painted on her very best smile and for what seemed like the millionth time pretended to be interested in the cow's endless tales of her pregnancies.

"Is this Percy's wife?" Yet another red haired man approached her. Disregarding the bandages covering one side of his face, the man was attractive.

"You must be Bill. Percy always spoke well of you. If you'll excuse me, I would like to give Harry a gift."

She tried to move out of the way, but he trapped her in a hug. This of course, attracted Mother Hag like a fly to dung. Penny found herself the middle layer of a Weasley sandwich. If it hadn't been for the burning need to get out of this house Penny would have whipped her wand out and started cursing them where they stood. The Hag started to tear up as Bill released her. It was obviously a signal for the foul wench to hug her even tighter.



After a short stint in Weasley hell, Penny was freed. She noted the look of disgust on the face of Severus Snape, who looked very much out of place at any gathering other than a funeral. She knew him to be one of godfather's servants at least nominally. Penny and her father believed that the only side Snape was actually on was his own. Penny did not know whether or not the man was aware of her identity.

There was her quarry, the golden boy of Gryffindor opening yet another book from Granger. 'Get a clue, you stupid bitch. He has a whole library up there, minus a few very nice tomes currently in her possession.'

"Hello Harry, happy birthday." She said holding the box out to him.

"Thank you Penny. How are you holding up?"

"Its hard, but I'm trying to do it one day at a time." Hopefully, that didn't sound so cliché.

Potter set her box on the table. "I'll open this in just a minute, but first I need to open the one from the Minister. I've been wondering what is in it ever since it got here this morning."

Penny fumed, but kept her composure as Potter attacked the large box. Inside he held up a pair of dragon hide vests, four dragon hide gloves and two matching wand holster. Body armor was expensive and illegal for anyone other than aurors and hitwizards.

Potter held up the three pieces of parchment. His fan club was still fawning over the expensive gift as he read the letter from the minister.

"Dear Harry,

*Please accept this for yourself and your fiancé. May they protect you in these dark times ahead. You are no doubt wondering about the legality of this gift, so let me put your mind at ease. The accompanying documents for Harry James Potter and Susan Marie Bones do hereby recognize the two of you as Professional Hitwizards in Britain and by treaty extension Europe and North America. The initial fee has been waived by my signature. A hitwizard or witch may wear body armor and have a second wand on their person. I*

*encourage you to take all necessary steps to protect your welfare. Be safe. Be well. Be Happy.*

*Respectfully,*

*Rufus Scrimgeour.”*

The silence was impressive. Finally, Potter spoke again. “Well Susan, here you were worried about not knowing what you wanted to do after school. We’re the first ones in our year to get a job!”

Emmeline Vance spoke up causing everyone to laugh, “Actually, Lavender has a full time job, but yours seems more exciting.”

“Oh right, forgot about that!”

Penny waited, quickly losing her patience as everyone wanted to see the body armor. She listened in near exasperation as a couple of the females went on about how the Welsh Green matched his eyes. If she wasn’t already anxious, she might be sick. After a time, Potter turned back to her.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting, Penny.” He said smiling at her as he reached for the box. He made a big show of shaking it to see if he could hear what was inside and then started carefully unwrapping the paper. He opened the box and put his hand to his chin. “This is Percy’s head boy badge.”

“It was one of his most prized possessions. I am sure he would want you to have something to remember him by.”

“I’m touched, but I can’t accept this. You should save this for your child.”

“No, I insist. He wanted to apologize to you especially. His pride got in the way.”

“Okay.” Harry said taking the badge from the box.

Penny immediately grabbed his arm and said, “Activate!”

There was a moment of silence. Then Harry spoke, "Did you charm it to do something? I remember Fred and George charmed it to read Big Head Boy."

Penny tried to apparate, but could feel a dampening field in place. In desperation, she whipped her wand out and put it in Harry's face. "Come on Potter, we're leaving."

Everyone was shouting. Harry raised his voice above the din. "Quiet! Penny, we are not going anywhere."

"I'll kill you."

"Go ahead and try Penny. Do you have it in you? It's one thing to lead a person in to a trap. It's another thing to actually kill someone point blank. What's it going to be?"

"*Lacero!*" Penny screamed a severing curse. Nothing happened. Well not exactly nothing, the wand in her hand turned into a rubber chicken. Everyone was murmuring. Bill produced Penny's real wand.

"You don't look very happy Penny." Bill said looking at her dangerously. A whirring sound caught everyone's attention. Penny's hand on the Weasley clock moved from Visiting Relatives to Imprisoned.

Harry spoke again. "Bill's right. You do look upset. Perhaps this will cheer you up. Ron! Would you please open the front door? I have a special birthday guest on the front step with Professor Dumbledore. Please ask them to come in."

Ron looked at Harry like he had grown an additional head for a second, but then went to the front door. The group collectively held its breath. At the door Ron gaped openmouthed and paled. "Bloody hell!"

Albus Dumbledore stepped in across the threshold and following him was the ethereal ghostly figure of Percy Weasley.

The group watched the ghost float through the room. He stopped just short of Penelope. "Hello darling. Funny thing about that oath you

tricked me into swearing, I need to protect my unborn child. I won't be able to cross until he is safe. The child's a boy by the way. I fear the thing I have to protect him from is you."

The next sound that could be heard was the sound of Molly Weasley fainting and hitting the ground.

## Chapter 17 – Not My Best Birthday Ever

“How long have you known?” Arthur Weasley’s voice broke the silence as he looked back and forth between Harry, his oldest son, and the ghost of his third son. He was bent over helping his startled wife to her feet.

“Percy managed to find me this morning.” Bill said. “I went to Dumbledore and Dumbledore contacted Dobby. Dobby told Harry. Bill nullified her portkey while he was hugging her.”

Harry avoided Susan’s withering glare. She was angry that she hadn’t been told. Here was this bitch trying to kidnap her Harry. Susan hadn’t even noticed that her wand had made it’s way into her hand.

“Why, Penny?” Molly Weasley’s weak sounding voice was heard.

Percy’s translucent expression hardened. “Because, in reality she is Antonin Dolohov’s daughter and Voldemort’s goddaughter.” There were shouts and cries throughout the room. Penny could only glare back at him. Though she was not struggling in Bill’s grasp. “Oh please Penelope, death glares only work against the living you stupid slut.”

If the room wasn’t already in turmoil from everything that had just happened, Percy’s vile insult. The few in the room that knew him well enough knew that it was completely out of character for him, but then again being dead can alter your outlook on things.

Dumbledore spoke up. “I believe the task facing us is to determine Penny’s fate and to understand the depth of her deception.”

“If it wasn’t for the unborn child, I’d just assume kill her.” Harry said shocking the already stunned room.

“Harry!” Several people cried out.

“What? I’m assuming nothing good was waiting for me on the other end of that Portkey. Were any of you almost just kidnapped? You’re all pretty quick to forget that he cost me my godfather. If he is actually fond of this worthless piece of shit, I send her back to him one piece

at a time.” There was no denying the venom in Harry’s voice. “I assume, because her condition we can’t give her the truth potion. So, headmaster do you want to mind fuck her or should I? I can use the practice. How about we ask our dear old Professor Snape, how in the fuck Tom fucking Riddle’s fucking goddaughter has been in my fucking house for the last week and he hasn’t felt the need to mention it?” Harry’s wand swung directly across the path to Professor Snape.

“I was never made aware of her involvement Potter. Cease you idiotic accusations.” Snape said with calm voice.

“Keep your hands where I can see them. If you make one move towards your wand, it won’t be a tickling charm or a stunner I use. Why are you here anyway? I don’t recall inviting you? Given our strained relationship right now, I don’t think the headmaster is in the business of having you around for the sake of irritating me. What brings you to my humble abode today?”

“I have Order business to discuss with the headmaster. It is none of your concern.”

“That’s a good story. Do you want to here my story? It goes like this. You came here to see the look of terror on my face as I disappear into whatever trap your master had waiting for me.”

“More of your incoherent babblings. You delude yourself as to your own importance.”

“Both the headmaster and I know exactly how important I am. You know what’s odd Snivellus? He’s here in the room right now and he hasn’t told us to quit our petty bickering yet. Maybe he is curious as well? How about it sir?”

“Severus, I am indeed curious about your presence here today myself. Please do us all a favor and relinquish your wand. Nymphadora, if you would?”

Reluctantly, Snape surrendered his wand. Tonks looked at him smugly. “Very well, if you must know I heard a rumor that there was a plot to harm Potter. I intended to make certain that my debt to his family was repaid in full.”

"I haven't smelled a load of shit that bad in a long time." Tonks said maliciously.

"Think what you will, Bellatrix, I mean Tonks. My mistake, the resemblance is remarkable. It appears to be affecting your behavior as well." The crack of her hand across his face failed to remove his sneer.

"Tonks! Severus! Enough!" Dumbledore's voice radiated power. "Why did you not bring this to my attention, beforehand?"

"I only learned of it this morning and you were nowhere to be found."

"It is true. I have been with William and Percival all morning. Return his wand to him. Severus, please return to the castle. I will be along after we question Penelope." Tonks looked at him and dropped his wand on the floor in front of Snape. He picked it up and headed for the door.

"I don't like it." Harry said as soon as the door closed.

"I am not pleased with the situation as well, Harry. He is my concern and I shall deal with him in private. For now we must turn our attention to the person who has made her allegiance crystal clear." Dumbledore answered turning his gaze upon Penny.

"I won't tell you a damn thing you relic." Penny looked at him only for a second before breaking eye contact.

"A comprehensive legilimancy probe will take some time, but it is perhaps the only avenue open to us."

Hermione spoke up, "She's been spending a lot of time with Ginny. Maybe we should get her."

Harry thought for a minute. "There may be another avenue open to us. Keep her here. I'll be right back." He looked at Arthur as he started up the stairs. "Mr. Weasley, I'll send Ginny down on my way up."

He knocked Ginny's bedroom door and opened it. Ginny looked up from the book she was reading.

“Hello, Harry. Come to kick a girl while she’s down?” She said in a voice laced with sarcasm.

“No. Get your ass downstairs, now! Clearwater is a traitor. We’ve got her, but aren’t sure how much damage has been done. Didn’t you hear the shouting?” He didn’t even care to see the shocked expression on her face.

“Mum put a silencing charm on the room.” She answered looking around worriedly and moved quickly out the door.

If Harry had been thinking or even really cared about Ginny’s emotional state, he probably could have warned her that her brother’s ghost was waiting for her in the kitchen with everyone else. Ginny screamed when she saw him. Molly grabbed her daughter.

“What’s happened Mum?”

Molly looked into her daughter’s eyes and gestured to Penny. “This creature was responsible for your brother’s death.”

Ginny looked at Penny trying to wrap her mind around what she just heard. Penny sneered back at her. “What’s a matter little Ginny? Starting to think about all those things you were telling me this week. All those little secrets and observations you were sharing with me. You little cow. No, that’s not right she’s the cow. You’re just her little childish calf. So sad that the gullible little girl that no one wants to talk to right now knew all kinds of things.”

“Ginny, what have you been telling her?”

“We were talking. I told her about all the things that happened at school. I thought she was our friend!”

“George, you went with her to the apartment. Did she send any owls or floo call anyone?” Arthur asked.

“Uh, I think she sent an owl. I wasn’t really watching her.” George said.

“What did you send?”



“Like I would really tell you, you hag.” Penny spit back at Molly.

“Actually, you will.” Harry’s voice came from the steps. He then retrieved one of the artifacts on the shelf from the Sanctuary room. He saw the look of recognition on Susan’s face.

“Harry what’s that?” Bill asked. Trust a cursebreaker to spot a dark artifact across a crowded room.

“This is a Black family artifact. Apparently, sometimes the arranged marriages didn’t go so well. Sometimes they needed a little something to keep the bride in line. This is a necklace of ensnarement. From what the portraits have told me, it works a bit like the Imperius curse. Whoever bleeds on the necklace will dominate the will of the one wearing it. She’ll talk.”

“You wouldn’t dare use that on me!” Penny screamed. She was terrified.

“Oh, I won’t be using this on you. If you were bound to my will, you’d slit your throat or go stand out in the street and get hit by a lorry or something. No doubt about it, I want you dead right now. No, we need someone with a strong will, someone who isn’t afraid to tell people what they should be doing and someone that is concerned with the welfare of the child inside of you. Mrs. Weasley, I could use your help with this.”

Penny paled at the idea of being subservient to Molly Weasley. The thought of that putrid hag controlling her free will made bile rise up in her throat.

“Harry, that’s a dark artifact. Maybe, we shouldn’t use it?” Molly said.

“I would also like us to take a moment to consider the path ahead of us. The object you possess offers a difficult choice.” Dumbledore said slowly. The room was quiet for a minute.

Susan broke the silence. She had seen her fiancé use unforgivable curses. Here he was with a necklace that was basically an unforgivable curse in solid form. “No, he’s right. Mrs. Weasley do you really want to hurt Penny or her child?”

“No.”

“Do you want to know how much information she managed to leak to her allies?”

“Yes.”

“Would you let her hurt herself, the baby or anyone else in this room?”

“No, of course not!”

“Then you are the perfect person.” It was a cool use of logic.

Harry returned to the exchange. “Mrs. Weasley, our two options are to use this necklace or use legilimancy to rip the information from her mind. That’s not exactly considered ‘friendly light’ magic either. Even then she could fight, us on it, especially if she has training and it will take time, even for Dumbledore.”

Dumbledore nodded sadly. “I still would like you to reconsider this course of action, Harry.”

“All due respect sir, but you’ve had to make the difficult choice or two in my lifetime. I’ll bear the responsibility for this one.”

Molly Weasley thought it over. She looked at her husband and the ghost of her dead son. “Percy, what do you think?”

“I know you will do what is in my child’s best interest.” He answered.

“I’ll do it Harry. Show me what to do.”

They used a knife to draw blood from her hand and dripped the blood over the necklace. Penny started struggling desperately with Bill and now Ron holding her. She started screaming vulgarities at everyone as Molly picked up the necklace and headed towards her daughter in law with a determined look on her face.

“No! Keep that away from me you bitch! Don’t you put that on me! They’ll make you suffer. You’ll all die for this! No! No! No!” Penny

screamed as the necklace clasp was fastened. Her eyes darted around wildly and seemed to glaze over as she met Molly's gaze. Her screams dropped to a whimper and faded completely.

"You'll never control me." Penny said glaring at Molly.

"Sit down Penny." The shocked expression on Penny's face as she immediately sat down on the floor was priceless.

"You bitch! You'll pay for this. I'll make sure of it."

"You are no longer allowed to say foul language Penny. It will not be tolerated. When you speak it will be as a proper lady or not at all."

"You b-b-b-b-b! I urgh!" Penny tried to articulate, but could not pronounce the words.

"You will not be allowed to leave this house with out my express permission. You are not allowed to apparate, portkey or use the floo for travel or messaging, whatsoever. You will not physically or magically harm anyone in this household. Do you understand me?"

"Yes." Penny's shallow reply sounded defeated.

"Yes, what?" Molly demanded.

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley."

Molly sat there for an instant. Her lips pursed in both thought and anger. The most unnerving thing happened next, Molly Weasley smiled. It was not the usual warm motherly smile everyone was used to seeing. It was cold and calculating. "No, Mrs. Weasley is far too formal and I think we know how you truly feel about all of us. So please Penny, call me Mum."

Penny looked like she had been physically slapped. "I will not address you in that manner!"

"Yes you will. Say my name."

“You’re a loathsome sack of Mum! You’re Mummy Weasley! You’re Mrs. Mum! Molly Mum! No!” Penny screamed sobbing into her hands.

“Hermione, be a dear and get some paper. We’re going to find out everything she told them and whatever else she might know.”

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Severus Snape was a man who was used to getting his way. Even this careful line he had always walked was still done on his terms. His steps carried him in circles around his passageway outside the headmaster’s office. His life was lived on his terms and though circumstances often limited his choices, it was still his choice to make. He should not have gone to see the looks on Potter’s fans after the girl sprang her trap. His lord had asked that he observe and report. They had even created a contingency plan to lure Dumbledore into a trap with false information. No one had anticipated the arrival of her dead husband’s ghost. Snape complimented himself on smoothly handing over his spare wand. How stupid are these people? It would have been so easy to kill the smug looking Bellatrix wannabe and use her body to shield himself. No wonder she is a miserable failure as an auror!

It was a testament to his quick thinking that he was able to come up with a convincing excuse on the spot. He wasn’t certain if it was from so much practice, or their stupidity. He chided himself yet again when it came to his mental blind spot – Potter. Something about the boy outraged him on a basic level. It was no longer about the ghost of his dead arrogant father. It was no longer about the attractive mudblood who wrapped everyone around her finger. He wouldn’t have minded a go at Lily Evans, but he wasn’t a simpering, leering, obsessing creature like Pettigrew. No, this was about Potter and his posturing and bravado. That he is the one who possess the power. His recent successes and engagement to that feeble witch had the boy strutting around the Mongrel’s manor house with a pompousness that would make Draco Malfoy proud.

He hated all the little maggots that crawled the hallways, even the little Slytherins. Each class became progressively worse. His method for recommending his prefects – visualizing each student and

deciding which one he least wanted to flay alive. Still the maggots had their uses. Most above fourth year he could tolerate in a conversation for short periods of time. In some ways being head of Slytherin house was worse than the others. Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and the Hufflepuffs were infested with muggleborn, who were relishing in the 'newness' of being magical. His students almost without fault were from pureblooded households. The gross corruption in society had a trickle down effect, where some of the pampered princes and princesses came to a school and were surprised that a house elf did not deliver their breakfast on a sterling silver platter to their dorm rooms. He never took off points, but Filch always helped him break the first years of their little notions. A few parents would protest their heir or heiress reports of horrible unwarranted detentions scrubbing things by hand or cleaning urinals, but more found it refreshing to see someone willing to discipline their child.

Every year he would gather the entire house the night after the sorting in an empty classroom and duel the both seventh year prefects individually in front of all of them. After dispatching the two of them, he would take on all four fifth and sixth year prefects at the same time. They were usually cowed by whatever he had just done to the two seventh years to be very effective. It was simple and brutal way of showing the house who was on top and it tended to make the younger years think twice before approaching him with such a trivial problem.

So, it was he paced before the gargoyle waiting for the headmaster to return where he would receive a mild tongue lashing followed by several repetitions of 'I'm very disappointed in your conduct.' Whereupon, Severus would promise yet again to curb his anger toward whatever was up the old relic's anal cavity this time. Having weathered the torture curse delivered by the Dark Lord anything the headmaster could offer was paltry at best.

His master would be angered by Clearwater's failure. It would be interesting to see how much the Dark Lord cared for Dolohov's illegitimate spawn. If indeed the Dark Lord actually cared for the girl, Severus would be curious to see his reaction. Dolohov will demand

immediate action. Realistically, Severus did not like his chances attempting a solo rescue from that place.

Ten more minutes of waiting and the gargoyle moved aside, signifying that the headmaster had returned to his office. As he started up the stairs, the mark in his arm burned. It informed him that the Dark Lord also desires a moment of his time. It was convenient, as he had already planned to leave Dumbledore with this excuse whether it occurred or not.

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“Interesting party you have here, Harry. Dark artifacts, traitorous spies, and delicious cake – we can’t forget the cake.” Remus said walking up beside Harry. Harry had moved into the parlor for the moment not wishing to hear Penelope’s droning voice anymore, knowing that every person in this house had now become a higher priority on Riddle’s ‘to do’ list. He saw Neville’s face twist in anger when Penny suggested how easy it would be to capture the Lovegoods in Sweden. Dumbledore had left after that, to speak with Snape and see if warning could be sent to the Lovegoods.

“Definitely not my best birthday ever.” Harry answered wryly.

“Here this is for you.” Remus handed him a very old book. The faded title was ‘The Ultimate Art – Conjuraton’. “Now that you are almost done with apparition, young hitwizard, I think it is time to put that raw potential inside you to the test. I’m not in Dumbledore or Minerva’s league, but I’m no slouch. I can get you started. Would you like to try something now?”

“Sure let’s go to the library.” Harry said wanting to get away from the crowd surrounding Penny at the kitchen table. They were currently trying with mixed results to describe each room in Riddle’s headquarters. Hermione, Lisa and Terry Boot were attempting to draw a rough map of the place. Harry was shocked to learn that Pettigrew had created a map table similar to the Marauder’s Map. Remus responded that the rat had been rather gifted at charms and runes. He had not been tops in the class, but Peter had been a contributing member to the pranks. Primarily, James and Sirius would

dream up the pranks and James, Peter and Remus would try and turn it into reality.

“So what exactly did Padfoot bring to the equation?” Harry asked.

“He was pretty much in charge of implementation. Once we managed to design the potion or whatever, Sirius would plan when, where and how. He and James also brought the galleons.” Remus replied opening the library door.

“So what would you like to me to try first?” Harry said looking at the book in his hands.

“Well open it to the page two hundred and ten. Hagrid was telling me that he lost his axe in France. I think Hagrid will appreciate it even more if it is from you. The shape is a fairly basic, wood for the handle and silver for the blade.”

“Silver?”

“The werewolves are getting restless and a full moon is coming.” Remus said shrugging.

For the next two hours, Harry worked under Remus’ watchful eye crafting the handle and blade. The temporary axes were done in steel to allow Remus to test the balance ‘feel’ of the weapon. Harry wondered where Remus had previously wielded an axe. It was probably better not to ask. Remus taught him the how to push past what was called the crossover point. In arithmetical terms it is the point where the wizard or witch manages to push enough power into the conjuration to make it permanent. Remus demonstrated by having Harry conjure flatware first temporary and finally permanent. Harry was tired when he finished the piece. It wasn’t anything fancy, but it was balanced and it looked dangerous.

Harry knew he was still pushing too much power into his conjurations. The true art is to use enough power to make it real. Conjuration was known to be one of the more wasteful branches of magic, which is why extremely capable conjurers were the ones with an intrinsic grasp of their own magic and limits. They talked while they worked, Remus asked for the specific wording of the prophecy. After Harry

played a quick game of twenty questions to ensure that Moony was exactly who he said he was, they spoke for a few moments about possible interpretations. Harry even told Remus about him joking with Dumbledore that by arranging the ambush, it may have been possible for someone to kill Riddle. Mooney acknowledged the possibility, but was a bit skeptical.

“Any more interesting items in your magic room?” Remus asked while Harry was taking a breather after finishing Hagrid’s gift.

“Yes.” He said simply.

“Care to elaborate?”

“Not really. If Hagrid is going to come across werewolves, I do have a knife that drips silver like a poison if a sickle is placed in the handle. Do you think he would like it?”

“Yes. I do believe he would. I recall Sirius mentioned that his family had such a dagger at one point.” Moony answered shivering at the idea.

“I’ll get it before we head back. Anything else you want to talk about?”

“How are you and Susan getting along?”

“All in all, I think we are doing pretty well. I think I am getting the better end of the deal, but she seems to think otherwise. How about you and Tonks?”

Remus groaned. “She’s been making excuses to avoid me. Her loss of her ability is really starting to get to her.”

“Too bad we can’t give her a kick in the arse. Wait one damn minute! Maybe we can. I bet Ginny still has some left over polyjuice. I think her parents confiscated it. What if she drinks it and changes? Maybe that could kick start her abilities again.”

Remus looked as if someone had just pointed out that the sun rises in the east. “Merlin! Such an obvious answer, I can’t believe no one has ever thought of it. It’s worth a try. Go ahead and get that knife. I’ll



go talk to Arthur. Remus practically ran out of the room like a kid heading for the dessert bar at a buffet.

Not ten minutes later, Tonks was standing in the room library wonder what was going on. Remus and Arthur had returned with the contraband and they caught Mandy Brocklehurst on her way up to use the loo and persuaded her to donate a strand of hair to the cause. When Harry and Remus explained their idea, Tonks looked skeptical. It was if she was refusing to allow herself any hope. Finally, Remus convinced her to take the polyjuice. They watched her switch from the version of Bellatrix into Mandy. Tonks stood for a minute admiring a different face in the mirror, almost relishing it.

Remus spoke, "Okay now take it slow, and change your hair color." Tonks closed her eyes and the straight brown hair normally belonging to Mandy changed to blonde. Delighted, she immediately did her best Hannah then Chelsea Abbott impersonations.

"What happens when the potion runs its course? Do you think I'll still be able to do it?" Tonks sounded a bit hysterical.

"What spell did he cast at you?" Arthur asked.

"Dunno. He hissed at me."

"So he might have said the spell in Parseltongue."

"Wait let me grab Susan's pensieve." Harry went into the sanctuary. He paused for a moment at the bowl as he removed the memories and put them back into his head. He got to relive all his terrifying moments from his adventures. It was not exactly how he wanted to spend the rest of his birthday with those memories fresh in his head. Unfortunately, pensieves can hold memories from only one individual at a time and Tonks needed it right now. The also had none of the special vials used to preserve memories available. They were on the shopping list for the next time someone ventured into Diagon Alley.

He returned to find everyone waiting expectantly. "Sorry, I had to remove the memories that were in the bowl already. Tonks, could you show me the whole battle against him. I want to see how Moody and Kingsley tried to fight him?"

“Okay, Harry.” Tonks answered in a quiet voice. She concentrated for a solid minute and then withdrew the memory. Remus offered to accompany Harry into the memory. Tonks wanted nothing to do with it. She actually looked a bit uncomfortable with Remus going along into her memory, but said nothing.

Seconds later Harry and Remus stood in the middle of the central chamber. They watched Riddle send his two death eaters away and challenge the four of them. The both moved over to stand next to Riddle and listen to the spells he was casting. Remus interjected on several describing the details of the spell. On a few, Remus was clearly stumped, such as one of the near fatal curses Kingsley barely withstood. Harry looked at the meager wounds suffered by Riddle and the type of armor he was using.

“Maybe Hagrid can identify it?” Harry shouted over the din of the melee. Harry ducked reflexively as several of Moody’s curses passed through him. Alastor Moody’s death was sad in a pathetic sort of way after Kingsley’s shockingly violent death. They followed Riddle up the steps and listen to him torment Tonks. Finally, when he hissed at her Harry only heard him say the following in Parseltongue.

“Stupid, ignorant bitch!”

The memory ended and they removed their heads. “What was the spell?” Tonks demanded almost frantically.

“There was no spell beyond his imperious curse. He just insulted you in Parseltongue.”

“He cast a spell!”

“No, he didn’t!”

“He had to have cast a spell. Tell me what it was!” There was a slightly crazed look in Chelsea Abbott’s eyes as Tonks continued impersonating her. It was slightly disconcerting. She was moving slightly aggressively towards Harry.

“I think I understand.” Remus said causing everyone to stop and look at him. “He used the oldest trick in the book, the power of suggestion.

He told you he was going to do it. You believed that he could do it and you haven't allowed yourself to do it ever since, because of your fear of him. How ironic a such a powerful man using a simple muggle trick like that."

"No! He cast a spell on me! I know he did. I know it!" Tonks sank to the ground sobbing. Remus picked her tiny frame up and held her while she cried against him. Harry waved his wand and put the pensieve back in his sanctuary. He then looked at Arthur Weasley, who had gathered the axe and knife and then both left the library leaving the werewolf to help his metamorphagus through the mental scars left from the battle.

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Lord Voldemort sat in his chair at the twelve o'clock position on the circular table. He stroked his pet Nagini as he waited for some news. He was ill suited to waiting. If the plan worked, it would be a major coup. Severus would be and they would bait the trap for Dumbledore. There were only a few of his death eaters present in the room. Antonin's report of his daughter's progress was encouraging. Peter had already been dispatched to Sweden to speak of his encounter with something called a crumple horned snorkack. Potter was shaping up to be a worthy adversary. It would be interesting to see if he would cave and tell him the prophecy, or sacrifice a friend.

The meeting with the Werewolves had gone well. The downtrodden dark creatures were at their breaking point and even Scrimgeour's ascension could not stop that piece from being fitted into his puzzle. Lord Voldemort's political allies and minions were doing their best to stymie the new government, but the new Minister was riding a crest of public opinion, or desperation. Potter's backing had driven off the paralyzing dissension that had plagued the Wizengamot. His rival's dalliance with the Goblins was an intriguing move. It could reap massive dividends or it could explode in his face. Dumbledore clearly had nothing to do with it. It was far too reckless of a stratagem for the 'leader of the light'. Scrimgeour's first act was to form a volunteer defense force offering surprisingly good pay to mediocre Wizards and Witches to be a defense auxiliary to the Aurors. He had detailed Malfoy and Faircloth to monitor and impede this recruiting. Faircloth

even went so far as to suggest that Scrimgeour might want the volunteer force to fail, to justify outright conscription. Eliminating Potter now would virtually topple Scrimgeour's administration.

Unfortunately for every two steps forward, karma forced him backward. The meeting with the Vampires was a complete unmitigated disaster. He had Antonin dispatch one of the death eaters under him to the Vampires clan in Italy, to demand restitution and made sure that the messages to the other three clans included the duplicity. The Vampires in France were a given. Some were already trying to make inroads to the Veela communities there. It was possible, but doubtful that either the Italian or Czech clans would join now. The Czech emissary was a favored one of the leader of that clan. The fourth was leaning his way. Parkinson's capture was not important, but Nott's death was a bit more damaging. He had been a competent fighter and while not nearly as rich as the Malfoys had been before the bitch's defection, the Nott family did help line his coffers with galleons.

Periodically, he glanced down at the map table at the apparition point and wondered if today the Universe would bend to his will or rise to thwart him again. He had already summoned Snape once. Perhaps a seconds summoning with a taste of pain through the Dark Mark would remind Severus that Lord Voldemort does not like to be kept waiting.

"You! Come here!" He barked at a woman standing at one of the tables in the corner working on large rolls of parchment. She was perhaps in her late forties, one of the Azkaban inductees. She hurried over to him kneeling before him and kissed the hem of his robe. Nagini lowered her face down to see the woman, making the already frightened woman shake even more violently.

"Yes Master." Her trembling voice asked.

"What is your name?"

"Helen Edgecombe, milord."

"Ah yes. You are working on ways to subvert the Floo system for use. How is the work progressing?"

“Tracking will be relatively easy to accomplish. Once we acquire a copy of the Ministry’s magical signature database and an up to date copy of the floo grid it can be operational within two months. The second phase is more likely twelve to fourteen months away. It will involve Floo redirection, whether it is something trivial like directing emergency calls to our fireplaces, so that they are never answered to outright kidnapping a person during floo travel. I have participated in several research groups where the theory was hypothesized. There is a pair of Americans who may be of use to us. I have asked Lucius for permission to contact them. Their voluntary participation could shave as many as four months off the second phase.”

“I will speak with Lucius on this matter. The idea of controlling a critical piece of the infrastructure appeals to me. Are you at a critical moment to interrupt your work?”

“No, milord.”

Voldemort mentally chuckled knowing that it was doubtful that even if she had been about to discover the secrets of the universe, that she would say so. She radiated fear as he recalled that she was one of Fudge’s more capable supporters.

“Your arm, please my dear. I must contact one of my wayward devotees and remind him that my patience has its limits. This will hurt quite a good deal, as you will be the conduit that carries my subtle reminder to him. If I had it to do all over again, I would have tried to work some of those flaws out, but it is still one of my most complex and successful ventures into blood magic.”

Helen Edgecombe offered her arm to her Dark Master again regretting the choices in her life that had delivered her to this point. The searing pain coursed through her body seconds later caused her to convulse in agony. It didn’t approach the torture curse, but the pain was not easily ignored.

The few others in the room attempted to act like nothing was amiss, most likely while giving thanks to whatever powers they prayed to that it was not them.

He looked down on the quivering mass of flesh on the floor before him knowing that only about one quarter of the actual pain was sent on to Severus. It was terribly inefficient. To cause him substantial pain would have required the use of the torture curse. He was willing to wait until Severus was here in person to use that particular punishment. He watched the woman crawl away from him and struggle to stand. Regaining some composure, she tried to walk as gracefully as possible back to her rolls of parchment and diagrams of the floo system.

Lord Voldemort was forced to wait two more minutes before the dot on the map with the label 'Severus Snape' attached to it appeared at the apparition point and started towards the main chamber. While he waited he lazily summoned two rats from the cage in the storeroom. The lower animals chattered in horror as Nagini snatched them out of the air one after the other.

"Go and digest your meal in the warm sunlight, my most loyal companion." He hissed watching the reptilian monster slither away from him. If he timed his command correctly, Severus should be opening the door right about now. The Dark Lord smiled in amusement as Snape opened the door to a face full of giant snake with two large lumps in its body. Nagini gave a warning hiss to the man as she passed by him.

"Come in and report, Severus. I do not like to be kept waiting."

"My apologies, Master, I was detained by the old fool. Your goddaughter has failed."

"What!"

"She was undone by the ghost of her dead husband."

"And why did you not know of this beforehand?" Voldemort allowed his face to show a momentary display of surprise.

"The ghost appeared only this morning and you will recall that I was here this morning assisting you with planning the trap that was planned for Dumbledore upon the completion of her task."

Voldemort looked back at his servant, "Is it my imagination or is Dumbledore beginning to isolate you from the details of his operation. Penny's letter contained much information that would have been normally accessible by you. There are two possibilities. Either you are deliberately withholding information from me or you're the old fool no longer trusts you. I believe you too smart for the former, so let us assume the latter."

"Milord I am loathe to admit it, but I must agree with your assessment. I am uncertain of how much longer my position among them will last. The only thing positive out of this is that I will most likely never have to teach a whimpering eleven year old how to make a boil clearing potion ever again."

"Still your original mission..."

"Yes, Master. I will make every effort to retrieve the full prophecy. Dumbledore has already released the known portion to the rest of his Order. Potter knows. I am certain his bitch knows as well. I hope to be able to use one to get it from the other."

"It is a serviceable plan. Kidnapping one will do as well. I'd rather you get Potter, but his woman will do in a pinch."

"What do they intend to do with Penny?"

"I am not certain. Dumbledore sent me back to the school to wait for him."

"Find out. I will need you to work with Antonin to formulate options for her retrieval."

"Yes, Milord." Severus said realizing that his master did indeed wish to see his goddaughter rescued. Unfortunately, the charm protecting the house would not allow him to knowingly breach it. They had tried several elaborate plans with Snape stunning several death eaters and trying to make a portkey there or activate a premade key with the intent of waking them up as soon as they arrived, but the magic of the charm refused to allow him to make the portkey to the hidden headquarters. Several of his inner circle was attempting to provide a

way for the Dark Lord to break the fidelius charm on the oppositions headquarters.

“I wonder how much the ghost learned while he was here? You will need to find that out as well. I suspect dear Albus will be calling a meeting of his little club to discuss Penelope. Learn what you can by any means you deem necessary.”

Severus rose, knowing that he had been dismissed. He yearned for a world free of Dumbledores, Potters and Dark Lords. Unfortunately, the simple reality was his side was chosen a long time ago when he took the mark on his arm.

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“It’s a thing of beauty. You do great work, nice smooth lines and well balanced to boot.” Hagrid said hefting the axe. The half-giant thumped Harry on the back hard enough to rattle Harry’s spinal column. “I’ll make sure to put it to good use.”

“I was hoping to get some tips on shooting a crossbow from you.”

Hagrid let a rather uncharacteristically dark expression across his face. “Don’t really know when I’ll be free, but any spare time I have is yours Harry. I’ll send word through Remus if I am going to be around. The knife is a fine piece of work, but something about this axe really gets me right here.”

The two men exchanged smiles before Harry was enveloped into yet another powerful embrace.

“Well I best be off. Remus and I have some things to be talking about. Keep showing them who is boss and that Harry Potter isn’t someone to be messed with.”

Harry watched Hagrid and Remus leave. Remus reminded him to rest up for more apparition and conjuration tomorrow. He gathered that Hagrid would be on a dangerous mission soon from the way he was acting. Harry was tempted to pressure him for the details, but a look back to the kitchen table for the beginning of the fourth hour of



Penelope Clearwater-Weasley's interrogation dissuaded him from badgering his friend about it.

Ron came over after Remus and Hagrid had left. "Wicked looking axe you gave Hagrid. Was it another of the Black family items?"

"No. I made it with Remus' help. He's starting to show me conjuration. It's pretty tiring, but amazing at the same time!"

"You'll have to show me how to do it. I've always wanted to make a sword. Right now I could think of a pretty good use for it." Ron said looking at his traitorous sister-in law.

"I suppose normally this is the part where one of us reminds the other that we're not supposed to sink to their level, but for the life of me I want that bitch dead." Harry replied.

Another voice joined there conversation, the ethereal voice of a dead man, "I am somewhat torn. I wish for my son to grow up with a mother, but I'd rather it not be her. Harry, it is late in coming, but I wish to apologize for my actions while I was among the living. I was too proud to admit that I was wrong and too stupid to come back to the family and admit my mistakes. I let her talk me out of trying to reconcile a dozen times in the past month."

"I don't know if it means anything, Percy, but I don't hold any kind of grudge against you. Perhaps, I can put you into contact with Minister Scrimgeour. He may be able to use you even in your present state."

"Provided my child is in safe hands, I don't see why not. My knowledge of how the government works and how it doesn't work could be useful to Mr. Scrimgeour."

Harry, Ron and Percy continued to chat. Harry even brought up some of the stories Charlie Weasley had told him on the night Percy was murdered. A couple of them Ron had never heard. It was both humorous and awkward at the same time. Harry had never known someone who had been living and was now a ghost. Percy was equally surprised that Charlie had been commandeered by Narcissa Black as both a bodyguard and apparently boy toy.

Susan came over to join the group. She came up and hugged Harry. Susan's hugs were normally soft and gentle things. This one had a great deal of tension and power behind it.

"How bad is it?" Harry asked.

"Pretty bad. She got off two letters. The first one named names. The second one was full of interesting observations like Hannah and Chelsea's talents among other things."

"It's okay. We'll get by."

"It is not okay. I almost lost you!" She hissed squeezing tighter.

"Easy there tigress. You're not getting rid of me that easily." He said running his hand along her braid. She enjoyed having her hair played with. Ron and Percy drifted away from the two of them – Percy literally.

"Not exactly a happy birthday. Was it?"

Harry thought back on a day that had started out with so much promise. Only to have it end in treachery, lies and deceit. Not to mention having to put all his 'adventures' back into his head from the pensieve.

"No I don't suppose it was. The good news is I'm still here, I've got you and with a little luck something that slimy bitch tells us will allow us to strike back at him." Harry said finishing with a kiss.

## Chapter 18 – For sale: one Weasley twin, slightly damaged

The older man looming above Remus Lupin wore a mask of pure hatred. He was approaching his sixtieth year on this planet. For the first twenty-one years he was known as Morris Collins, a pureblood of no real consequence. Morris was a shy and reserved Hufflepuff, with very little magical ability. He had been content to be a good little worker in the Ministry, hoping his hard work would elevate him to great heights in the Ministry. That all changed one moonlit night, when a pack of desperate werewolves attacked the small cluster of homes where Morris Collins meticulously maintained his quaint little home. How he had screamed when one of them broke through the window and leapt into his den. When the claws raked across Morris's chest drawing blood. He had hastily attempted the reductor curse at point blank range and severely injured the werewolf in front of him. The creature stumbled into him and sank her yellowing teeth into his shoulder, marking him before she died.

Like the good little drone he was, Morris reported everything to the aurors on the scene. They congratulated him on killing the she-wolf, but looked on in sadness at the messy wound on his shoulder, before portkeying him to St. Mungo's. Morris wasn't too worried. He had his job, his family and a promising relationship with a witch named Carla McKinnon.

Two months later, Morris had been fired from his low level ministry position, his family was actually paying him to stay away from them and his sweet Carla had left him for one of the Prewett boys. It was there in his small, no longer clean home, crouching naked in a cast iron cage that his family had generously given him for his use that Morris Collins ceased to exist. When the full moon rose that night, Morris Collins was no more. In his place, stood Fenrir Greyback.

Greyback had tasted the milk of human hatred and spit it back into their faces. He embraced the darkness within him. It stoked the fires of his magic, turning his faint flame into a roaring inferno. He stopped using the cage. He began making acquaintances among the criminals and the lowlifes. Carla McKinnon Prewett's mauled body was his fifth kill or at least the fifth one that he remembered. Somewhere along the way, he sired the Lupin boy in the mid 1960's. From what little he

recalled, he had been trying to kill the boy, but had been driven off by the boy's father. After the invention of the Wolfsbane potion, it was almost a spiritual revelation for Fenrir. He could now control his beast and fully enjoy the killings. He loved the foul tasting potion even with its debilitating side effects. It allowed him to harness the monster within him. Most of his kind, the ones too afraid to embrace their animal, would use the potion to fight the urges. Greyback took a more practical approach using his knowledge combined with the wolf instincts to make him a ferocious monster. He would train both magically and physically for the weeks prior to his transformation adding muscle to his frame. He wore a runic charm collar to help protect him while in his true form. His ultimate goal was to become the perfect killing machine.

Ten years after he had been reborn, even his own family would not have been able to recognize him, but oh did the other werewolves of England know him. He was Alpha having killed the previous Alpha in 1966. Even the Alphas of the other packs feared Greyback. In the 1970's, he allied himself and his pack with the wizard known as Lord Voldemort. He saw a kindred spirit with a thirst for power and a hunger for domination. Things were promising until the Dark Lord fell in 1981. The pack he formed broke up. Several of the fools thought themselves to be new Alphas. Several dead fools later, Greyback was still Alpha. From time to time, he would have dealings with the wizarding world. His glamours allowed him to resume life under the guise of none other than Morris Collins. He kept ties to the Dark Lord's followers, they kept him funded and his diminished pack and he assisted in some of Malfoy and Nott's more unsavory problems. Greyback had never taken the mark, but he was no less a Death Eater than any of the others. The Dark Lord understood that bearing another's mark on an Alpha was a sign of weakness.

The time between the Dark Lord's fall and his return were lean times for the pack. Caves were often homes. The generosity of the Dark Lord's inner circle was unreliable. Of course when they needed someone eliminated or something they deemed beneath them done, they would come to him with false smiles and gifts 'befitting a leader of the werewolves'. Other times, he would be treated with disdain and contempt, like 'the family member no one really wants to see.'

Perhaps in seeing him, they realized how close they had come to losing their mansions and their trophy whores.

Greyback continued to exist on the fringes of society until the Dark Lord's return. He made contact through Augustus Rookwood instead of Malfoy or Nott. Rookwood was more appreciative of his kind. Pity he did not have the wealth of the other families. He was much less smug than the others, but perhaps it was that very fact that made Rookwood more acceptable than others. True, werewolves suffer from their obvious metal poisonings, but others suffer from the poison of gold running through their veins. A person like Malfoy would wither and die with no gold. His idea of roughing it was a cell in Azkaban. He knew that nothing less. A person like Malfoy would be the weak link of a pack.

So, it was with Rookwood at his side that Greyback once again prostrated himself in front of Lord Voldemort. It was like spring had finally arrived after a long and desolate winter. He was ordered to return his pack to its former glory. For the last year he had recruited the strong and the cunning, turning his pack of survivalists into a fighting force waiting to be unleashed.

These thoughts crossed his mind as he continued the relentless beating of Remus Lupin. The offending smell of urine flooded his enhanced senses, infuriating Fenrir. This was one of his more comfortable safe houses. It would take forever to get the smell out.

"Is that all you got? I'm disappointed in you!" Remus Lupin heard the voice growl as a steel toed boot slammed into his stomach for a second time. He doubted there were apparition wards, but from the pounding in his head he knew that apparition was not an option. He was bleeding internally and his right foot was pointed in the wrong direction as he struggled to protect his vital organs from the physical beating.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out about Foster and Jensen's deaths? I figured you were behind it! Did you actually believe that you could catch me off guard? The light side's 'pet werewolf'! Hah! Do they give you fresh bedding? Do they scratch you behind the ear to see if your paws will thump on the ground? Maybe if you are good enough they

might let you get a job again? You disgust me Lupin! Killing you own kind! You know what happens to traitors, dontcha? I brought you into our world and now it falls to me to remove you from it!" The boot kicked this time into Remus' right knee cap and triggered a scream of agony from the injured wizard.

"So scared you have pissed all over yourself. What would your friends say now?" Fenrir said eyeing the dagger in his hands, the same one Lupin nearly used to end his life. The tiny drips of silver shimmering on the blade. "Any last words before I deliver vengeance of the Alpha?"

Greyback raised the dagger for its final strike when a section of the wall exploded. A thundering mass of human flesh slammed into him, knocking him across the room. Greyback lost his grip on his wand, but held on to the dagger. He scrambled to his feet and stared into the eyes of Rubeus Hagrid brandishing an axe gleaming in some places, bloodstained in others. Greyback was no small man, but the half-giant towered above him.

Hagrid leapt forward bringing the axe down in a forceful slash that splintered the floorboards. Fenrir barely rolled to the side. Fenrir immediately closed the slashed with the dagger and opened a jagged wound on Hagrid's arm. It was enough to make the larger man loose his grip on the axe. Seizing his advantage, Greyback closed the distance stabbing Hagrid repeatedly in a relentless onslaught. For a brief shining moment, Greyback thought that his ferocity would carry him through to victory. That illusion shattered along with his jaw when Hagrid's put his full weight into his counterpunch. If Fenrir Greyback had a moment to clearly see the situation, he would have been impressed by his adversary's strength and power. Hagrid grabbed him and slammed him into the wall. If the half-breed would only just let him go, he would apparate away to safety. Unfortunately, Hagrid had no such intention as he punished the leader of the werewolves making what few injuries Lupin had managed to inflict seem like mere love taps.

With a primal roar Greyback was lifted into the air and smashed down onto the kitchen table. How he managed to stay conscious Greyback would never know. One of his fingers gouged at the half-breed's eyes

evoking a howl of pain as the massive man staggered back. He was free. The room was spinning and pain wracked his body. He had to focus and clear his mind if he was going to apparate to safety. That's all he needed. He would be safe in just a moment.

Fenir Greyback's moment of clarity came only after the massive silver axe with the force of a raging monster behind it ripped through his midsection; shattering his spine and cutting him and the table he lay on in two.

Hagrid looked around as he dripped blood onto the floor. He retrieved Harry's knife and took a moment to claim his prize, before working his way back to the battered form of Remus Lupin.

"I told yah to wait for me Remus. You're a mess." He said. Hagrid looked around and found Greyback's wand. He used it to lift the wounded werewolf onto a bearskin rug. He reached into his pants pockets to retrieve the portkey. "Hang in there Lupin, Poppy will get you fixed up in no time."

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The glamours covering Lord Voldemort's face were impressive. His normally pale face and mostly non-existent nose were replaced with a healthy looking face of a man in his early forties. A fake hairpiece covered his head with false brown hair. It was an odd feeling having hair again. All in all, Voldemort looked like a normal everyday wizard going about his normal business as dusk approached in the Wizarding community. He walked the streets of Diagon Alley casually as he stretched his legs. Secret headquarters were nice, but what is the point of being the most powerful wizard in the world if, he could not get out and be among the people occasionally. He toyed with the notion of removing his glamours and appearing in his true form. With Peter away in Sweden and his other various minions occupied in their tasks, Voldemort had actually assigned himself this mission.

He approached his target, Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. There was a sign telling people not to worry about him, but worry about 'you-know-poo'. Voldemort was amazed that this pair of fools would actually open a store, permanently fixing themselves to a single location. They were either foolishly brave or thought so very little of

him. Either way they would pay dearly. None of his current hostages would be of enough value to Dumbledore and Potter to exchange for Penelope. One of these two would suffice. As he approached he sized up the wards protecting the shop. They were fairly impressive, but still one can only ward a public store so well if you actually wanted to have customers come in to your shop. The more potent wards would also have to wait until the shop closed for the day, which wouldn't be for another ten minutes.

He grasped the handle only to have it turn into a tongue and lick his hand. It was disgusting, but original. He squeezed the tongue and yanked the door open. A voice announced the words 'fresh meat' as he walked into the store. The store was full of nonsensical items such as biting teakettles, fireworks, and even a few muggle items that he recognized from his years living among them. He wiped the saliva off of his hand while he briefly entertained the effect of a dozen 'whoopee' cushions at his next meeting, before discarding the notion.

He pauses to look at a display of garments enchanted with a basic shield spell, nothing in the league of body armor, but probably appealing and affordable to the masses.

"Some of our best sellers. Even the ministry is looking at a procurement contract." One of the Weasley twins approached him. There were a few shoppers finishing their purchases.

"Really?"

"You would be surprised at the number of people who can't cast a basic shield correctly."

"Actually, I see it all the time." Voldemort responded thinking of all the people he has killed in his lifetime.

"If you are interested, we're on back order right now. These are just the display models. It's hard to keep them stocked right now. If you want to make a deposit, we'll have the next batch ready in three days."

"Looks like you have a rather prosperous business so far. I haven't been in Zonko's in several years, but it looks like you have a



competitive inventory." Voldemort was not above complimenting the wizards. If it wasn't for their family loyalties and his current requirements he wouldn't even bother with them.

"They haven't had any real competition in a long time other than Gambol and Japes. Their product lines are stagnant. It's been over three years since they introduced anything new and even then it was just some rebranded French products that they import from the continent."

"Stagnation is the bane of industry and government. Change is good. Competition promotes innovation." Voldemort said and realized that he wasn't as successful at tuning Peter out as he had thought.

Fred Weasley, as he introduced himself was very helpful. He demonstrated a few of the fake wands that turned into various ridiculous items and showed him some of the newer products. Voldemort noticed the pride in the young wizard's voice as told the story behind the creation of 'you-know-poo'. Apparently, it was the fourth formula that really added the kick to the product. The first three variations just didn't cut it.

"And here is our latest product, the Instant Predict-a-Death Crystal Ball, for all the kiddies who need some inspiration with their divination homework. I'll demonstrate it for you." Fred said touching the ball.

A voice boomed out, "Fred Weasley will die a horrible death when mistaking Acromantula venom for Milkweed extract during a potion making accident!"

"Interesting."

"Would you like to try it?"

"No, perhaps some other time." Lord Voldemort took a moment to wonder if it would shout his name or if the detecting spell on the toy would be blocked by his Occulmency.

"Well, I hate to sound like I am trying to hurry you up, but we have a small celebration planned for our friends this evening." Fred gestured

to the counter where his twin and another male stood with three young witches.

"What is the occasion?"

"Both Alicia and the lovely Angelina have both just signed their professional quidditch contracts."

"My congratulations. Which team will you be playing for?"

The other twin chimed in, "Lee if you would the introductions."

The black boy grabbed his wand like a microphone. "Now starting for the Falmouth Falcons in the number two chaser position, the Ebony goddess of flight, she-who-shall-score with the quaffle and according to Fred without the quaffle as well – Angelina Johnson!" The black girl smiled and then chucked a random item off of the shelves behind her at the announcer.

The boy ducked it with practiced ease and continued, "And our next budding star, joining the Chudley Cannons as the number one reserve chaser, but seeing how badly they play she'll be starting by mid-season. I give you the Dive Bombing Dominatrix, a woman who will prove that beauty can be found even in the hideous Canon Orange – Alicia Spinnet." Alicia now joined Angelina in hurling items at Lee. One of the items was a stuffed bear with a padded beater bat. It animated when it hit the cash register and was now attempting to strike the announcer with its weapon. A second prank had hit the boy and his hair was changing colors. Fred was laughing and identified it as the 'four second hair coloring kit', which featured a new hair color every four seconds for the next hour.

Voldemort remembered the boy as the school quidditch announcer from his time lurking in Quirrell's mind. He chuckled recalling the staff meetings after the matches and watching the Heads of Gryffindor and Slytherin argue about his announcing. "You both must be very talented."

"Thanks! I think Lee is a bit off though, it's the seeker and the weak beaters that are holding the Canons back. Their chasers are good, so

I'll have to work if I want to break into the starting lineup. Who do you support?"

"I haven't really followed quidditch in a long time, but I plan on attending some games in the future. I had hoped to attend the last world cup, but obstacles kept getting in my way." Ironically, one of the last games he attended featured most of the people in this room playing. He was focused on killing Potter at the time, but what little he remembered was entertaining.

"At least you missed the Death Eaters then." The blonde girl said shivering slightly.

"Yes, I suppose I did." He answered ruefully. It was slightly distasteful that he was about to ruin their little celebration. He had hoped to come in and take one or both of them and leave, but it apparently was not to be.

"Well if I could show you the door sir, we'll be happy to have you back tomorrow or any other business day."

"Actually, I do have need of something in this store." He said pulling his wand out. "I need both of you Weasleys to come with me and no one else will have to suffer."

"You're a Death Eater!" The other twin screamed from behind the counter. Voldemort stunned Fred and pointed his wand at the five people. The black boy went for his wand only to get hit by the killing curse. The blonde and the other twin also pulled their wands. He easily reflected the girl's stunner and the boy's cutting hex back at them. The girl dropped like a sack of potatoes and George Weasley lurched forward onto the counter spurting blood from his neck caused by his reflected cutting curse. The final two girls stood in open-mouthed horror unable to move from the shock.

He stepped forward to the counter and moved the head. It was already too late for the wizard. The wound was too deep – killed by his own spell. He was dead already, but his body just hadn't realized that. In an almost absurd coincidence, the 'beater bear' continued to swat the head of the now dead Lee Jordan, whose hair was still

changing colors. The whole time Voldemort kept his wand trained on the two remaining girls.

"I assume you know Potter." The black girl managed to nod. The other one was in near hysterics. He stunned her. You can't hold a conversation with hysterical women. It was difficult enough to hold one with one in the room.

"Tell him I have this one. If he wants him back, we can arrange for a trade. I will send the details." He summoned the previously stunned girl's wand and enervated her. He watched as she came to and stared at him in horror. "What is your name?"

"Katie Bell, you murdering bastard!" He noticed the black girl was attempting to calm her down.

"You have good reflexes and a fast wand draw. I could use a few more people with your skills."

"I'll never be a Death Eater and serve your sick fucking master! I kill you! You bastard! Angelina, let me go!" She was practically foaming at the mouth. Angelina was restraining her.

"Let her go miss." Voldemort said. The girl had spirit and she was correct she would never be a Death Eater or anything else.

"No, Katie. He'll kill you."

"Here is your wand, little girl." He hissed as he tossed it onto the counter. He let the glamours fall away from his face. "I am the sick master, girl!" She shrank back realizing that he wasn't just some run of the mill Death Eater. "Yes that's it. I see your fear, but you already said you wouldn't serve me and you have drawn your wand against me. So pick up your wand like a good girl and prepare to die."

She trembled in fear. Angelina wasn't doing much better.

"Stay there and die or take your wand and die, it doesn't matter to me. Your death was assured the moment you insulted me." The girl grabbed her wand and threw her best curse. He blocked it and killed

her. He tilted his head sideways as he watched the killing curse quench the light in her eyes.

"A pity, she had some potential." He said looking at Angelina.

"She was my friend!"

"When she drew her wand, she became my enemy."

"Are you going to kill me now?"

"Why would I do that? I want you to deliver a message to Potter and Dumbledore that if they want this one back, they'll give me what I want."

"You're a killer."

"Yes, I kill those that stand in my way. It's a natural talent. You and your friend there didn't draw your wands. Therefore, you don't have to die, today. Somewhere along the way people have gotten the idiotic impression that I want to kill everyone. Who would be left to rule, if I kill everyone? Deliver my message and when it comes time for you to make a choice; I suggest you choose not to stand in my way." He said before he stunned her.

He levitated the stunned form of Fred Weasley. He would need to walk out of the store before he cleared the Anti-apparition wards. Pausing for a moment he lowered his mental shields and placed his hand on the crystal ball.

"Lord Voldemort will die because of a plot by the House Elves!" The voice cried out. He let a thin smile cross his lips at the ridiculous statement as he floated his hostage out the door beyond the wards. He triggered the Dark Mark and apparated both himself and Fred Weasley away in front of a few stunned shoppers who had suddenly spotted the Dark Lord standing in their midst.

The Weasley family clock now resided in the Ravenclaw common room next to the window. Ravenclaw tower had a very nice view of the setting sun. Terry Boot and his girlfriend Mandy Brocklehurst were taking full advantage of the fact that the others were in the

dining hall for a bit of good old fashioned snogging. Both seemed ready to take their relationship to the next level, when the clock chimed loudly interrupting them. They watched one of the hands fall off and onto the carpet. A second one, rotated from 'Mortal Peril' to 'Lost'.

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"So technically you would be my great, great, great grand uncle." Neville Longbottom said as he looked around the spartan quarters assigned to Darius Longbottom.

"I see. Your friend Harry speaks well of you. I regret that we have not met beforehand." The vampire answered still fairly certain of what would have transpired had he suddenly arrived at the gates of the manor and announced his presence. The boy had an eager to please puppy dog look on his face.

"Is it true that you are going to be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts this year?"

"The headmaster has asked me to teach. I may be more suited to teach potions. I have more practical experience in recent times in that field. He is finalizing his plans and when he does, he has promised to tell me which course I will be instructing."

Neville took that in. This probably meant that Snape was finally going to achieve his dream of teaching Defense, but Potions might finally be tolerable. "Potions! Really? That would be brilliant!"

"Indeed. So, tell me about yourself and Hogwarts. It has been over eighty years since I have been in Britain. What classes do you like? I have heard from Wulf about this conflict, but I would like to hear it from your perspective."

Coedus sat back and listen to Neville talk about his fascination with Herbology, Hogwarts and the war. It wasn't particularly interesting, but it passed the time. Time being something Coedus had in abundance. He had at times worked in various apothecaries throughout Europe to make ends meet. Several of the shops he worked at preferred his nocturnal habits that allowed him to work late

into the evening. He was by no stretch of the imagination a potion's master, but he was competent and capable. He would prefer to teach Defense. He would also prefer to have his magic back and feel his heart beat again, but the world has shown a certain indifference to his wants.

He casually asked questions while Neville spoke. The boy seemed reluctant to speak of Potter's adventures as the recent traitorous plot had emphasized the importance of being circumspect in one's tales. Coedus did not pressure him for answers that he did not wish to give. He would learn these things in due time. The boy lacked any male influence in his life. He was meek and reserved. Coedus could change that.

"So do you intend on dating this Luna girl you speak of." He almost enjoyed Neville's discomfort.

"Well I hope so. I am still trying to figure out how to ask her."

"Neville, part of succeeding in both magic and life is visualizing your success. You don't sound like a person who is convinced that he is going to be successful. Life will not provide for you unless you make it. There is a cemetery full of our dead kin that will testify to that fact. You must become more confident in your abilities. I will help you to realize your potential. Would you like that?"

"Very much so sir." Neville answered wide-eyed.

"Now that you are here and able to perform magic within the confines of the castle, I would like to see your offensive and defensive capabilities. If I do end up teaching Defense, I would like to see what caliber of talent I have to work with. Let's go to a classroom."

"Actually, would you like to go to the Room of Requirement?" Neville offered.

"I had heard some of you mention this room, but I do not recall this from my days here."

"Well, it was a secret room, but the secret's pretty much out in the open now. The room is utterly brilliant. All you have to do is think

what you want and it provides it. Need a dueling arena? Done. Study area? You bet!"

"Indoor quidditch stadium?" Coedus asked more interested in the room's limitations than actually having an indoor stadium, although it did have a certain appeal.

"Err, I don't know if anyone has done that before. Sounds pretty big. The only downside is that you can't take anything out of the room. It disappears. Ron told me once that Demelza and Natalie had turned it into a pool and were coming out wearing bathrobes and they kinda just disappeared right in front of him leaving the two of them starkers."

"Interesting. Very well then Neville, show me this room that will attempt to mold itself to my imagination."

Coedus followed his relative through the hallways as he wondered what he could do with such a room at his disposal. The possibilities intrigued him

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The hair on the left side of his head was burnt and the skin around it blistered by the heat of the fire spell that had almost blinded him. He had cuts and bruises on his body, some still oozed blood when he walked. Still, he would show no weakness. It was beneath him and his new image. Peter walked proud and upright into the central chamber. Over his right shoulder was the stunned body of Luna Lovegood charmed to be weightless. He approached the table, stopping to bend to one knee and bow before his master. Standing, he brought his prize to his master. The eyes of several inner circle members were on him as he laid the girl on the table.

"Well done, Peter. I take it there was some resistance."

"The father was nothing. He is dead, but this one fought well. She is quick and agile. I sent the two recruits that accompanied me to the mediwizard already."

"Take her to the cells and then go see someone in the infirmary."



"Yes master." Peter said picking up the body. He turned to walk away, but stopped looking in the eyes of Lucius Malfoy. "What is it Malfoy?"

"Just wondering how badly, the little girl beat you?"

"You wouldn't want to face her Malfoy. Considering the list of people who have recently handed you your ass includes a house elf named Dobby." Peter retorted. "It was the highlight of my time as a rat listening to Harry Potter tell that story. Plus you couldn't handle Narcissa. What makes you think you could handle her?"

Malfoy moved his hand towards his cane containing his wand, but Peter shifted the body on his shoulder to reveal his wand was already in his hand. "Do you wish to add a rat to that list as well?"

Peter smiled as Malfoy returned his hand to the table and continued on his way chuckling in a raspy voice as he left the chamber. Master was pleased with him. His position in the Organizational Chart was secure. One of his precious books had several chapters on dealing with political office bullies. They have been invaluable in dealing with the Malfoys and McNairs of the world. A nice leisurely walk carried him to the dungeons. A pair of Death Eaters sitting at the desk looked up as he approached.

"Fresh meat?"

"Special guest of the master. Not to be touched without his permission." Peter answered.

"Cell one is empty."

He walked past the cells and heard a familiar voice, "Bloody hell, Luna! You bastards!" Peter stopped and turned. The boy in front of him looked none the worse for wear. He must also be a protected prisoner. Peter recognized the red hair.

"Is this Gred or Forge?"

"Fred. How do you know me?"

"I lived at the burrow for almost twelve years."

"Pettigrew!" Fred Weasley hissed.

"In the flesh. Well except for the hand. Good to see you again Fred. How are things?"

"How the hell do you think they are? I'm in here!"

"Rather snappish of you, young man. I've been away for the past few days. Just let me deposit Ms. Lovegood here and I can come back and catch up."

"What makes you think I want to talk to you?"

"Well you're the one who started this conversation. I figured you might be bored. One of the things I missed after I left your family was all the unusual gossip. I hear Bill is getting along with that French girl? Do you think they'll be getting married? I was just teasing Lucius about his ex running off with Charlie – any news from them? I heard you and George opened the joke shop you've been dreaming of all this time. I've got some good prank ideas if you are interested. Some of the old Marauder stuff and some new stuff I've come up with over the years."

Fred stared at the short and plump Death Eater for a moment, not believing his ears. "I don't want to talk to you! Leave me alone!" Fred screamed. He couldn't comprehend that the Death Eater was talking to him like they were old friends.

"Fine, I'll come back when you are more reasonable." Peter said walking towards the designated cell.

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It was the next day and word had spread of the tragedy at Fred and George's shop. Alicia was home with her parents and not taking things well, but her brother the auror brought Angelina to Hogwarts after taking her statement. Fawkes retrieved Harry from his house and brought him and Susan to Hogwarts for the day. Harry asked Angelina to provide the memory of the fight. At first she was shocked that he would want to see it, but then he explained that he is attempting to learn how to fight him by studying how Voldemort fights.

She agreed, glad to be rid of the painful clarity of the memory. The distraught young woman was sent on her way and Auror Spinnet was given a message to give to the minister, who wished to know what exactly the Dark Lord was requesting. Harry and Dumbledore both viewed the memory from start to finish. Harry was troubled at watching more of his friends perish at Voldemort's hands. George had been like a brother. Lee had been a good friend and a constant source of entertainment. Katie was a pretty girl who had helped him out so much his first year on the Gryffindor quidditch team.

"Will you provide your memories of fighting him?" Harry asked

"I will. We have crossed wands a total of four times including the battle at the ministry." Dumbledore answered.

"I'll need every advantage I can get. Right now the only advantage I can see is that he doesn't really take me seriously. While he is showboating and grandstanding, I am going to kill him if I can."

"He has a vast array of spells at his disposal." Dumbledore cautioned.

"True, but he is bound to favor some over the others. My intention is to master spells that work best against the spells he favors. Is Professor Flitwick in the castle?"

"He is due back from his vacation next Friday. You would like his assistance?"

"Yes. He was a professional duelist and his take on how Riddle fights will be useful. I hope he will help me develop a strategy for fighting him. He may even know some of the obscure spells I saw him use at Azkaban."

"I will arrange for you to speak with him. If he decides to assist you, it will be his choice. He gave up dueling after an unfortunate death during a match. Filius has even turned down repeated requests to teach Defense. You will need to convince him to help you."

"Are there any others who have memories that I could use?"

"None that I know of. Igor might have fought alongside of him, but he has been missing for two months and I fear the worst has happened to Durmstrang's headmaster. I will check Alastor's personal effects. They have been left to me. He also possessed a pensieve and might have had a collection similar to the one you are creating."

Dumbledore looked up for a moment. "Professor Snape is coming up the stairs." Harry wondered how he had known. There were rumors that the castle told him things, but that was mostly due to all the portraits reporting various happenings to the headmaster.

"Welcome Severus. What brings you here?"

"The Dark Lord has tasked me with negotiating an exchange of prisoners. He demands Penelope be released. In exchange, Potter may have either the surviving Weasley twin or the Lovegood girl, whomever he decides to save? Neither have been tortured as of yet, but the one he does not choose will suffer. I have been assured of this." Severus said savoring the look of defeat crossing both of their faces. His master was a true genius of psychological torture forcing Potter to decide which of his friends would be saved and which would not.

"How long have we been given to reach a decision?" Dumbledore asked.

"I am to return in twenty four hours time for your answer. The prisoners will be safe until then."

"Very well return to him Severus."

Harry bit his tongue not to say anything to Snape as his cloak billowed out of the room. He fought to control his hands as they trembled. Harry knew he hated the man, but for the first time he wanted to cause him pain. As soon as the door closed behind Snape, Harry drew his wand and cast a privacy charm.

"How can you continue trusting him?" Harry screamed.

"I do not."

"What!"

"Harry, I am not blind to what he is doing. I am reasonably certain he has made his choice to side with Tom. If not, he will be making it soon."

"How about a rescue?"

"Improbable. His headquarters is unplottable and Severus does not know or is not willing to share who the secret keeper is."

"Capture someone else? Convince the Minister to give us a couple of Death Eaters?"

"On such short notice, I don't think so. The Minister would not want to set a dangerous precedent of negotiating for hostage release."

"I don't want to have to choose between Fred and Luna. That's sick!"

"At the moment, I do not see any other options."

Two minutes of silence pass before either says anything. "What if we give him something more valuable?"

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed. "Just what do you have in mind, Harry? If you plan on trading yourself, don't even entertain the idea."

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"Good evening, Mr. Malfoy." Marcus Flint said looking up from his desk. The glory of being a Death Eater had slightly worn off seeing how all he had been doing since the initiation raid was guarding prisoners with two of the other newly initiated Death Eaters. Most recently, his job was tuning out the screams from the young women that Lucius Malfoy brutalized on a regular basis. 'No wonder his wife left him' the young death eater thought on several occasions.

"Yes, Marcus is it? I came to offer you a bit of a break. I want to interrogate one of the prisoners and would like not to be disturbed for the next three hours."

"Understood sir. The prisoners in cells one, four, five and six enjoy the Master's protection. The others you may do with as you please."

Lucius watched the young man get up to leave. "Oh, Marcus? *Obliviate*." Lucius blanked the previous five seconds from the young man's mind. It was such an insignificant change that even the Master would have difficulties detecting.

Lucius watched as the dumbfounded idiot left the room never knowing that his mind had been tampered with. He cast a locking charm on the door and headed towards the first cell. The little blonde girl in there looked quite a bit like Narcissa when he first met her, so young and pretty. Since the traitorous bitch was not here to pay, this one would have to do. She was the rat's little trophy – Peter's great achievement of the week. All the more reason to do what he is planning. Since being freed from Azkaban, it had been one disappointment after another in Lucius Malfoy's life. He needed this. He craved this. He would not be denied this.

Luna Lovegood looked up. Her pretty face marred by tears and bruises. Her father and mother were waiting for her on the other side and from the look on Lucius Malfoy's face they would not be waiting very long.

"Anything to say, you little piece of worthless trash?" He glared at her while running his wand lecherously across her cheek. He had a hungry look in his eyes.

"Why is the sky blue?" She answered with her large blue-grey eyes.

"What?" Those who knew her would not have been surprised at her style of question.

"Well the muggles have their answer, but I have never heard a good answer from the magical world. It makes me wonder if magic is the answer for everything." She answered simply.

Lucius Malfoy did not know why the sky was blue, nor did he really care. There were many things Lucius did not know, but violence rape and torture he knew all too well. He turned and cast a silencing charm. It was not normal procedure to use the silencing charm in the cells.

The screams of terror did wonders for loosening the other prisoner's tongues. However, Lucius had something other than the normal procedure on his mind as he leered at the girl.

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'Those bastards have Luna.' It was the only thought on Neville's mind. The greasy bastard had made sure to mention it to Mrs. Weasley loudly enough for some of the students to hear. He also mentioned that they were only going to trade for Fred or Luna and that Harry would have to choose. Looking around he saw the look of despair on Ginny's face as she dealt with the knowledge that her words had resulted in Luna's capture. There was a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Harry would choose Fred. He knew it. Everyone knew it. The few Ravenclaws there seemed relatively unaffected by the idea that Luna would suffer. They were probably the same people who like to make fun of her and enjoyed hiding her things.

He wanted to hit something or better yet someone. It wasn't fair! She deserved better than this! He saw Harry walking down the hallway from the headmaster's office. Neville realized his angry wandering had carried him in this direction for a purpose.

Harry's eyes acknowledged him and he nodded curtly.

"Harry, I just heard." Neville's voice had a touch of desperation to it. "I know nobody else is going to say it, but please choose Luna."

"I can't talk about this right now Nev. I don't want to choose between either of them." Harry said angrily.

"Please you have to save her!"

"Neville, I understand, but I can't talk about it right now. The headmaster is going over our options and I need to find Susan and go back to headquarters."

Neville watched him go not really caring for anyone else's anguish but his own. Walking away, Neville continued making his way to the exit from the castle to the greenhouse. Professor Sprout does most of her work before breakfast, so the greenhouses were quiet and

peaceful in the evenings. On a few occasions, especially the weekends, he encountered couples sneaking in a snog amongst the greenery. He had heard many versions of the phrase 'Get the hell out of here, Longbottom!' some much more colorful than others.

Even when he was at home, he liked to work in the gardens. There was a quiet serenity to working with the flora. He traced his love of plants back to his early life when his Gran was at a loss what to do with a preconscious little boy, so the stern woman put him to work weeding the gardens. It was the first time she ever told him that he had done something right that Neville remembered. She actually had smiled at him! It was the one thing his Gran would consistently praise him for, though she was always on him about how the weeds can easily get out of control if you let them go.

Neville liked to equate life to a greenhouse. There were the good plants and the ones that were simply weeds, taking everything and giving nothing back in return. While he pondered he picked away at the small weeds that were trying to take hold around a medicinal bloom used in skele-gro. It was important to take care of the little weeds before they took hold. He worked smoothly and efficiently through several planting boxes.

'It's a shame life isn't more like a greenhouse.' He thought to himself trying to keep his mind off thoughts of his friend. Grabbing a pair of pruning shears he set about removing some of the dead foliage to make a bigger healthier plant. Professor Sprout would be pleased.



## Chapter 19 – Why Lucius Will Never Eat Corn Again

It was one of the perils of being a Dark Lord, suffering the incompetence of your underlings. It was an inescapable part of his life. Perhaps star athletes suffer from the same malaise, knowing that their abilities are what really carries their team. Somehow knowing that you are the best and that no one around you will reach your level. No matter how many times he would say 'Do not fail me.' to a group of his minions, one or more of them would inevitably discover a new and incomprehensible way to fail him. It was a careful balance, a fine line between enforcing discipline to maintain order and perverse sadism. Any would be Dark Lord must understand the magnitude of the failure and punish accordingly.

So it was that he and the rest of his inner circle came to be staring at the quivering mass of flesh known as Marcus Flint. The rest of the new initiates lined the walls of the central chamber. The young Death Eater had already endured several torture curses from both Lucius Malfoy and Peter Pettigrew for his failure. Georgina Crabbe, wife of Crabbe Senior and a licensed healer was attempting to undo the damage to the Lovegood girl. It had not been a pretty sight. Pettigrew was incensed. The latest reports were that she would live, but odds were that she would spend her days in the long-term spell damage ward only slightly more coherent than Bellatrix's victims.

"Enough!" Voldemort said causing Peter to terminate his curse. The Dark Lord rose from his chair and walked towards Flint. He looked at the thirty or so Death Eaters that filled the room, sensing the nervousness of all the 'newbies'. His inner circle remained calm, knowing that their master was about to do something to the boy.

"Dear Mister Flint, how to express my displeasure in your failure? I am almost at a loss for words. Which is your wand hand?" The waste of magic in front of him held his right hand towards his master trembling in fear. Voldemort brought the heel of his boot down on Flint's left hand enjoying the sound of the cries. Too often his minions forgot the simple pleasures of 'old fashioned' torture. Slaves to their magic, they were. Voldemort continued standing on the hand while scratching his chin thoughtfully.

“What have you to say for yourself Marcus?” He demanded.

“I have failed you Master. I am not worthy.” Flint grunted. It was an impressive answer. He had expected begging and pleading. It was a pleasant change to someone used to such groveling.

“Indeed you have and at the simple task of guarding a prisoner. Had she overcame her bonds and somehow escaped, I would certainly be upset, but no you failed to pass on a simple order that the girl was off limits for my loyal follower’s entertainment. Peter, would you agree that such dereliction is unacceptable?”

“Yes, Master. Please allow me to kill him.” Peter answered. His eyes were practically begging for permission.

“Alas, no Peter. Not this time.” Voldemort said as he removed his foot from the crushed hand beneath him. A quick wave of his yew wand and the bones mended themselves. “Stand up Marcus.” He commanded.

The rest of the room was deathly silent as Marcus stood. The tension in the air was delightful. “Show me your mark.”

Flint complied and rolled up his sleeve to reveal his Dark Mark. “You will have to earn this back, Marcus. Prepare yourself for this will no doubt be painful.” With that, Voldemort touched his wand to the brand and began chanting in Parseltongue. The young death eater cried out in pain and sank to his knees as the insignia of his servitude was ripped from his arm. Leaving the boy on the ground he walked over to one of the new Beauxbaton recruits, a pretty young brunette with hazel eyes. Leaning into her, he whispered his instructions. She nodded and immediately left the room.

Voldemort crossed to the other side of the chamber and opened a cabinet. He withdrew a pair of vials from the rack and removed the stopper. He walked casually back to Marcus, who had returned to his standing position. It gave Voldemort a slight pause. He wondered if removing a mark so soon after it had been applied caused the resulting pain to be less than he had expected. Perhaps the longer the mark had been allowed to imprint itself on the wearer caused the pain to be greater when it is removed.

“Drink up, Mr. Flint.” He said handing the two vials to Marcus, who immediately downed them.

Voldemort paused before continuing. “Diluted Manticore tail venom. You officially have thirty minutes to live, young man. In five minutes time, you will leave for Gringott’s. If you can kill ten goblins and make it back here in that time, the antidote and my forgiveness await you. Otherwise, you die from the poison or the goblins. Good hunting Marcus and do make certain to use the phrase ‘Die Goblin Scum’.”

Voldemort shoved the shocked wizard towards the door. Marcus Flint scrambled out of the room and headed for the apparition point. Severus approached him. The tall potions master whispered, “Milord, you do realize that if the antidote is not administered within ten minutes, it is ineffective.”

“Of course Severus, somehow I doubt a single wizard storming the Goblin’s lobby would last more than a minute or two. I sent the female recruit to observe how the Goblin defenses react and his Mark is gone. I wouldn’t want to push the creatures further into an alliance with the Ministry. Of course the Goblins will be outraged and when they find no Dark Mark or evidence of the Imperius curse, they will be angry at the Ministry. Besides, the second potion I gave him will mask the effects of Lucius and Peter’s curses. It was something he should have recognized from his NEWT level classes. You must be slipping in your lectures, Severus.” The Dark Lord ended with a smug rebuke of Snape.

Severus nodded knowingly. Flint was no real loss. It was reassuring to see that his master had thought this plan out. He knew that the diluted poison once in the bloodstream would do its work and then destabilize long before any autopsy would be performed.

Voldemort turned to the assembled Death Eaters and addressed them. “Each and everyone of you is important to me. We have gathered together for a cause, to see this useless and ineffective Ministry swept from existence and establish a new regime that governs not from rules and laws, but by strength and power. We will not let them continue to weaken and dilute our strength and sap our resolve. They have always sought to hide our existence from the

muggles, slowly watching our numbers dwindle. How much longer before we are not a viable society? How can we claim our birthright and heritage as the supreme beings on this planet, when those that claim to rule us are strangling our very existence? No more I say! This foolishness ends. The old guard will be swept aside. Those that stand against us will perish at the end of our wands! We will rebuild the Wizarding world to protect it from the muggle empires. I will not allow our way of life to be destroyed. You are my chosen ones. You will be the ones who stand beside me as we usher in an age of glory not seen since the days of Merlin himself. Our time has come! Our time is now! Today Britain! Tomorrow the World!"

Voldemort smiled as he saw the euphoric faces before him. One would think that the impending death of Marcus Flint was a celebration. 'After all,' he thought. 'All the world is a stage and I intended to have a leading role.' It was ironic that he didn't believe a word of what he just said, but some will follow power and some will follow a message, but more will power and a message.

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"Something vexing you?" Susan asked across the breakfast table as she spread some preserves on her toast.

"Just worried about Fred and Luna." Harry responded. He didn't like lying by omission, but the wretched 'greater good' demanded it. He was worried about the tow of them, but it wasn't the only thing on his mind.

"Well, Snape said they weren't being tortured at the moment. I'd like to believe him, but I lost any and all trust for him the moment you pulled that mask off his face." Susan replied recalling the night her family was slain. She looked over at the portrait of Harry's godfather. Both Sirius and Bellatrix were passed out at the table in the picture, the ever-filling Firewhiskey flask between the two. After a bit of awkwardness, the two echoes got along surprisingly well and were in the middle of trying to drink each other under the table when Harry and Susan returned from Hogwarts. It appeared that there had been no clear winner between the cousins. Sadly, neither her mum nor her aunt had sat for a Wizarding portrait and truth be told, Susan wasn't

exactly sure she would want to find one. Would they have approved of her actions? Her aunt seemed to like Harry, but liking and approval were two completely separate things. Beyond a few questions every now and then, Susan had no idea what her mum thought of Harry Potter.

"I know. I just want to get the both of them back. We've got Tonks in another hour and Lupin in the afternoon. How are you feeling?"

"Never better. Professor Lupin complimented me on my transfiguration yesterday. He thinks I am almost ready to try some basic conjuration." Susan answered with her best chipper smile. Mentally, she sighed. All the aches and pains from her training sessions still nagged at her. She had never worked this hard in her life! Tonks was a ruthless slave driver and even though Susan knew she was improving steadily, she knew it wasn't enough. Harry outclassed her in every sense of the word and he was so driven! Her Hufflepuff loyalty and work ethic were often the only thing that kept her from quitting in exhaustion. She suspected that in a fight she would be both a liability and a distraction to him.

Oblivious to her anxiety, Harry had confided that he was worried about Tonks. True the metamorph had regained her ability, but she was still hurting from her ordeal. Harry had said the young auror was a cheerful person with a carefree personality, but she still hadn't seen it. Professor Lupin was doing his best, but while his skills in transfiguration, defense and conjuration were quite good, his social skills with the opposite sex left much to be desired. The auror had a good deal of anger that she wasn't suppressing very well at the moment.

"I told you that you would catch on. It's just like transfiguration only you start with nothing. Maybe you'll have a knack for it."

"I wouldn't hold your breath, Harry. The only thing I seem to have a knack for is collapsing in exhaustion every other hour of training." Susan answered slightly downcast.

"I prefer when we collapse in exhaustion together after our private workouts." Harry said playfully trying to lighten the mood. Seeing it did not work, he switched tactics. "Susan, don't you ever wonder why

all the teachers spend all this time lecturing and don't just show you how to cast the spell. You ever wonder why charms, transfiguration and defense are all taught on different days? Constantly using your magic is exhausting. Don't let it get you down. I'm pretty much knackered by the time drill sergeant Tonks is done with us. Just wait until I start doing this to the DA this year and watch how they hate me."

"You're right. I just can't help comparing my performance to yours. Well, I better get going if I want to get back before the taskmistress arrives."

"Are you sure you don't want me to go with you?"

"I'll be fine. Hardly anyone is in Gringott's this early. Besides, I don't want you to see my mother's wedding dress, when I get it out of the vault. It's bad luck and I have to drop it off at Madame Malkin's for professional adjustments. Plus I have to look for 'something old' down there."

It was still amazing that they were talking about getting married in just a few short weeks. Hannah, Chelsea, and Hermione had taken the lead in getting preparations rolling. Yesterday while Harry had been dealing with the horror surrounding the deaths and abductions, the trio were helping her design the invitations. It seemed a bit ridiculous in light of things, but Harry had actually encouraged her. He told her that they needed to continue on and not let the attacks deter them. She suspected it was just something to keep her occupied, but didn't voice her suspicions to anyone other than Hannah. Most of the others seemed to be busy planning the funerals of those who died at the joke shop. It took some of the joy out of their planning, but they still made significant progress.

Susan stood up and gave Harry a quick kiss. "I promise, I'll be careful." She then headed to the floo and called out for the Leaky Cauldron before disappearing.

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Susan quickly made her way into the alley. Under normal circumstances she would have floored to the Weasley's store, but

sadly it wasn't the case. She passed both Lavender Brown and Colin Creevy who were headed to the Cauldron for breakfast at the end of their shift. She did note that they were holding hands as well, which allowed Susan to test out her evil smile at the possibility of spreading a bit of her own gossip.

There were not too many customers this just shy of seven in the morning. She spotted a young woman at the new accounts desk using what she suspected were not so nice words in French. The goblin servicing her looked slightly irate, but then again Susan thought that most goblins look slightly irate. There were a handful of customers already at the teller windows but over half had no one at all. She was walking past the several with customers on her way to the cart area when she heard a shout.

"Die, goblin scum! *Lacero!*" A wizard in a brown cloak fired a point blank severing charm at the teller in front of him. Susan froze momentarily as the man jumped up on the counter and began firing curses at the goblins. The one directly opposite from her managed to flick a dagger almost reflexively at the wizard before disappearing into a fine bloody mist. Susan started backing away and fumbling for her wand as she saw the dagger bury itself into the wizard's shoulder. He howled in pain and continued firing curses. Three security trolls were coming out of the guardroom. The ground shook as something massive hit the ground behind her.

Chippedfang was the nightshift security manager. As such, he had a nice desk situated back and away from the teller windows. He should have been relieved by now, but Spinebreaker was taking advantage of him again. True, his appointment was only in the last month, but he would eventually have to challenge the older and more well positioned goblin, unless he wanted to spend an additional two hours each day waiting for his relief. The moment the curses started flying. He immediately hit the first touchstone. That seals off the entrance and sounds the alarm in the guardroom. Within seconds trolls would be dispatched. He activated the second touchstone, which would alert the Humans, as a courtesy. The goblin at the desk next to him fired a crossbow at the deranged wizard. The stick-waving monstrosity responded with a blasting curse that destroyed his neighbor's desk mortally injuring Burntflesh and showering him with

debris. The goblin security chief was knocked to the ground and stunned. With his mangled left hand, now sporting two less fingers than when he started the night, he hit the third touchstone. That would finish this fool.

Flint had two daggers and three crossbow bolts sticking out of his body. He was starting to become dizzy, but tried not to lose focus. Was it five or six of the foul imps he'd offed already? He tossed another exploding curse into the teller area sending blood and money – both Wizarding and muggle into the air. He felt the counter he was standing on shake. Did Gringott's employ giants? He spun and looked at the lobby as four massive statues of gargoyles leapt down from their perches gouging the tiled floor. Each was maybe four meters tall. He fired a blasting curse at one only to see it fizzle ineffectively at some magical shield protecting the creature. He managed a second one before the golem was upon him. The hole blown into the wing may have been a small comfort to him as the creature's stone claws eviscerated him. Had Voldemort placed a bet on Mr. Flint's performance, he would have been pleased to know that Marcus lasted one minute and thirty-seven seconds.

Susan watched in horror as the gargoyles converged on the wizard and an instant later he was dead. Her wand clutched uselessly in her hand. She had been about to start casting stunners at him before the gargoyles arrived. Unfortunately Susan, like most other customers in the lobby at the moment did not know the limitations of such fantastic constructs. They were impressive in size and strength and the magic that protected them, but were hampered by the small number of instructions that could be issued to a construct. The goblins of Gringott's had programmed their constructs upon activating to attack any human actively casting spells with lethal force. Any human holding a wand was to be disabled using reasonable force – well, reasonable to a goblin that is.

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Lucius Malfoy managed a small smile as he watched the rank and file leave the room. Flint's death was certain. He almost felt bad for recommending to the boy that he admit his unworthiness and accept what punishment the Master offered. Despite last night's 'activities',



Lucius was still a very frustrated man. His discreet inquiries to his ex-wife's whereabouts had turned up nothing. He didn't even know where Draco was, only that the whore had sent him to the mainland on a vacation. The parents of the boy's friends questioned their children and turned up no clue. To say Lucius was concerned was a mild statement.

"Lucius now that the new initiates are gone, perhaps you would care to enlighten me as to why I was forced to dispose of Marcus like that?" Voldemort queried.

"Milord, it was a terrible misunderstanding ...", he started but was silenced by the Dark Lord holding his hand up.

"Sniveling does not become you, Malfoy." Lucius winced at the implied anger of the statement. "Somehow, you expect me to believe, that you did not realize that I had plans involving the girl when I specifically tasked Peter with her capture. Am I to assume that you have so little control over your urges, that you would purposefully endanger one of my carefully laid designs? I do believe the pressures of your position are getting to you, Lucius. Do you feel that I am placing too much of a burden on you for your meager skills to handle?"

"No Master, I ..."

"It does not matter what you feel or what you think! It matters what I think and what I think is that you are a failure! Time and time again, you fail me! Your vaunted political allies are doing little to stop Scrimgeour. They can barely slow him down at this point. Your inability to keep your wife in check resulted in her leaving with a good chunk of your fortune, which is hampering my war efforts. You led my followers into the Department of Mysteries. I don't even want to discuss my diary! Perhaps a change in job functions is in order? Madame Faircloth, I wish you to begin communicating my wishes to Baron Carruthers. Salvage what you can from the present situation. Peter, you will take charge of the daily operation of my headquarters. Ensure that there is no repeat of last night's idiocy."

Lucius was visibly stung. His responsibilities summarily stripped. "Milord, these are but setbacks. I can still prevail."

"I want you to consider how you will prevail for the next week, Lucius." A flick of his wand and Voldemort created a cage. "I want you to think long and hard on how you intend to serve me, when I return you to your human form. Peter will make sure that you have plenty to eat and drink this week. He's very good at caring for animals, though I don't know if he has specific experience with dungbeetles. Peter, do you think you can manage to keep Lucius fed this week?"

Peter gleefully looked upon the horrified expression on Malfoy's face. "I will **personally** provide his dining, Master. Thank you for this privilege."

A second wave of his wand and an incantation interrupted by Malfoy's desperate plea for leniency and in Lucius Malfoy's place was a much larger than normal dungbeetle. Peter carefully placed the insect into the conjured cage.

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Susan stared at the golems in a mixture of horror and relief. The wizard's death had been shocking, but it was over. At least that is what she thought until one of the statues turned towards an elderly wizard who was approaching with his wand out and backhanded him with arm that easily weighed twice as much as Susan. The man went sailing through the air and impacted against the wall. The other statues were moving on other witches and wizards.

"Turn the blasted things off!" She screamed. None of the goblins or trolls seemed to pay her cries any heed. She watched as a middle-aged witch was thrown bodily into the teller area. She had to do something quickly. She stabbed her wand and shouted, "*Reducto!*" She watched as her blasting curse impacted ineffectively on whatever runic magic was protecting the monster. It did get the attention of the creature, steering it away from the trio of spellcasters in front of it.

'Good going Bonsey! Now it is going to kill you!' She thought quickly and decided on a plan of action. "*Catena ex Ferreus!*" Her and Harry's use of the combat magic book in their private sanctuary had led her to this binding spell. The Latin in the spell was straightforward enough 'Chains of Iron'. Six feet of linked chain shot out of her wand and curled around the legs of the stone behemoth moving towards

her. It staggered and fell. Instead of using its claws to free itself it dragged itself forward towards her using its arms. The golem still moved quickly, but it gave Susan enough time to complete the most complex spell she had learned from the aforementioned tome – a swish, a jab, switch to two-handed grip, two complete circles around her head and thrust towards intended target. “*Tero atque Contrucido!*” The spell itself was a blasting spell meant to attack fortifications. The book had nicknamed the spell as the ‘Dionysius’ s Pocket Siege Engine.”

The scarlet beam from her wand was painfully slow. By the time the golem and the spell collided, barely three meters separated the two of them. Susan felt a pull on her magic as the lancing energy struck the gargoyle head on. Her eight inch willow and chimera fur wand twitched and vibrated as she struggled to maintain her two handed grip. It was not the only thing to vibrate. On the other side of the beam the gargoyle’s forward momentum was completely halted. The stone that formed the head shuddered as the runes protecting the stonework blazed against Susan’s magical assault. A flash of light and a resounding crack signified that one side had given way. For a brief horrifying moment, Susan thought it was her wand that cracked. Thankfully, it was the stone head that gave way and exploded as the beam began boring a ten- centimeter circular hole into the statue’s torso. The rest of the statue toppled onto its right side.

Susan’s victory was short-lived as the destruction of one golem drew the immediate attention of the other three, which had been on the other side of the bank where only a few humans were still standing. Apparently, she was now the greater threat as all three began rapidly closing the distance. She had only one option. She sprinted for the nearest cart. The goblin inside it was cowering.

“Drive dammit! Go!” She screamed at the goblin. She cast the chain binding spell again as the cart rolled forward and started picking up speed. It slowed one down and the second had to navigate past the already destroyed gargoyle, but the third closed the final gap and brought its clawed fist down on the side of the cart derailing it. The blow sent the speeding cart careening off the tracks and into the wall.

The gargoyle lurched forward, but sensed that the threat had been neutralized. Before it could scan for the next threat, it received the 'all clear' signal and started back towards the carved pedestal from whence it came along with the two other remaining constructs.

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Harry drummed his fingers impatiently on the chair in Dumbledore's office. He was on edge, like the case of nerves that he usually gets just before a quidditch match. Having been here all morning and with it approaching noon, Harry was hungry, but not certain he wanted to eat. He wished he could go flying. Maybe, he could bring Susan out here tomorrow and go for a few laps around the pitch. He had seen Terry and Mandy headed for the broom shed as Tonks led him up to the castle. They were probably going flying, but then again, given those two who really knew what they were up to. Susan would enjoy the morning off. Trixie would inform Susan that Harry had been brought to Hogwart's instead of having the morning lesson.

"Bored, Lord Black? My carcass is no doubt turning in its grave." Phineas Nigellus' painting asked. In Dumbledore's office, the painting and Harry agreed that the echo should maintain his air of disdain and indifference towards Harry. Back in the Sanctuary, they had spent several long hours together. The painting was able to provide keen insight into the behavior and actions of Albus Dumbledore.

"Behave, Phineas." Dumbledore chided while offering Harry a lemon drop. Much to his surprise, Harry actually accepted taking two. Harry popped one into his mouth and simply glared at the portrait of Phineas Nigellus. "Relax, Harry. Events will unfold as they are meant to. Impatience will do nothing to speed their progress. I have sent Minerva and Filius to greet Severus. I daresay that he will not be pleased that his floo access to the castle has been revoked."

"I am surprised you are going through with it." Harry said.

"Sometimes as one gets older, it becomes harder to admit one's mistakes. You would think it would get easier with age. Often the young are accused of being headstrong and resistant to change, but I can assure you people of all ages fall prey to those maladies. I will ask you to avoid provoking him."

"I won't provoke Snape. I won't back down from him though."

"This is usually the point in the conversation that I tell you to call him Professor Snape. Isn't it?" Dumbledore said foregoing another lemon drop in favor of a licorice wand.

"Yes, but after today the best you could do is scold me for not calling him Mister Snape." Harry added.

"Indeed, Harry."

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"What is this foolishness? Another meaningless security procedure?" Severus demanded. The floos at Hogwart's were denying him access. He was forced to arrive in Hogsmeade and apparate to the edge of the wards.

"Good morning Severus. Beautiful day isn't it?" The unusually chipper voice of Filius Flitwick said. Both he and McGonagall were on the path obviously waiting for him.

"Well?" Severus demanded looking down at the diminutive charms professor. He enjoyed watching the smile disappear from Flitwick's face.

"I'm going to have to ask you to surrender your wand." McGonagall interjected.

"Again with this? Oh very well." He said handing it to her.

Filius spoke up. "The other one as well, Severus." There was an implied threat in Flitwick's tone of voice.

"I see. Suppose, I am unwilling to part with it?" Severus responded, the words slowly tumbling out of his mouth.

"Then, we would both find out how fast I really am, Death Eater." Flitwick responded. He paused before continuing, "The point is moot anyway. Even if you outdrew me, Minerva would finish you. What? You don't think she has it in her? Consider the fact that you are here

bartering with the lives of two of our students, before you make your choice.”

“Technically, Fred Weasley is a former student, but Filius is quite correct about my feelings.” Minerva said as both men realized during their tense exchange that her wand was now in her hand. “Now that the pleasantries are out of the way, you will surrender your spare wand and we will escort you to the Headmaster. Afterwards, you will be escorted back to this point, where the house elves will be waiting with your personal effects from the castle. Is that clear enough for you, Mister Snape?”

“What!”

“Well, I suppose it won’t be official until Albus tells you, but we are done with you. You have worn out your welcome by working with a monster that makes war with children! I had always thought the day you were finally shown the door would be a joyous occasion, now I realize that the show is not worth the price of admission.”

Realizing his position, Snape surrendered his backup wand. He was then instructed to walk five paces in front of the two of them into the castle. Oddly enough, they passed several other professors on their way to the Headmaster’s office. Several just looked at him. A few even managed a serviceable imitation of his mocking sneer. Pomona Sprout met his eyes and before walking away loudly proclaimed, “Good riddance to this pile of rubbish.”

At the entrance to the office, even the statue seemed a bit more hostile. Instead of the quick fluid movement of it stepping aside, it was slow, deliberate and its head turned to follow him as he ascended the steps. He raised his hand to knock on the oak door.

“Enter.” He heard before his hand had made contact. The door opened of its own accord. Inside Dumbledore and Potter awaited him.

“Greetings Mister Snape. Please be seated. Before we deal with our unpleasant business, I will have to ask you to bear with me as I am forced to conduct some official business.” Dumbledore paused while Snape seated himself. “On behalf of myself and the Board of Governors of Hogwart’s School of Wizardry and Witchcraft, it is with

great regret that I must invoke clause seven of your employment agreement. I have prepared a document for your review, which indicates exactly how and how many times you have violated the 'Due Cause' caveat of your agreement. If you wish to appeal this termination, you will need to present your case when the Board meets later this month."

"Exactly what led you to this course of action, Headmaster?" Severus asked not really attempting to sound polite.

"The pensieve memory provided by young Susan of your actions at her house. Harry and I viewed it after you left yesterday and I must say that both of us were quite surprised to learn that it was you and not Rudolphus Lestranger that performed the killing curse on Dana Bones. It seems I have failed to steer you back into the light, but I am beginning to believe that you never really wanted to come back."

There was a pregnant silence as Dumbledore sipped his tea. Harry merely regarded Snape with an impassive look on his face. He thought of watching the memory with the Headmaster after Snape had left them, while collecting the Headmaster's memories of fighting with Riddle. He remembered being angry enough to kill. Harry planned to apologize to Neville for being so short with him. Twenty seconds later, Dumbledore spoke again.

"Well, I suppose we must now discuss the terms for our prisoner exchange. The exchange will take place tonight at nine PM, at the edge of the wards. Your master will not be present. The prisoners will ..."

Snape had had enough of being pushed around. "Nor will you, Dumbledore. No more than five of your precious Order is to be present."

"In that case no more than three Death Eaters are to approach within 500 yards of the wards." The aging wizard's ire was palatable."

"There will be equal numbers." Snape countered.

"I intend to be there regardless of what the two of you decide." Harry spoke up.

“Harry ...” Dumbledore started.

“Don’t take that tone with me. I am going to be there.” Harry said with a finality.

“Very well. Five Order members and Mr. Potter.”

“Five Death Eaters and myself.”

“Agreed.”

“Then my business here is done. With the exception of knowing the name of the person Mr. Potter intends to spare.” Snape said standing up. The old man looked sad.

“Fred Weasley. We’ll trade Penelope for Fred. I’ll escort him to the wards.” Harry said. “I need a good patronus memory.”

“Minerva and Filius have that covered, Harry.”

“No, I’ll handle it. I haven’t let Susan see that memory since she took it out of her head and somehow I’ll have to explain to her that I let the bastard that killed her Mum walk away, twice. So, I damn well am going to enjoy giving him the heave ho.”

“Very well, Harry. Take Severus to the wards. Do remember to be civil. Send Minerva and Filius up to see me.”

“Well Ex-professor Snape, what are you waiting for?” Harry said gesturing with his wand towards the door.

They walked down the steps and Harry relayed Dumbledore’s instructions to the slightly bewildered professors, before continuing towards the exit. Snape waited until they were alone before indulging in a bit of goading.

“It’s a pity, Potter. Had the old man started training you the moment you first stepped foot in this school, I would say you would have one chance in ten against the Dark Lord. Having seen the two of you in action, I know you stand no chance.”



“Always looking to save your own worthless hide. Keep walking.” Harry said in an even tone.

“I am sure the Lovegood girl will keep many of my lord’s troops entertained. I daresay that I might even partake.”

“What would it take to save her?”

“What are you offering, Potter?”

“How about a memory of what I witnessed just before I destroyed the Headmaster’s office? I believe you overheard the first two lines, shortly before you sold out my parents to the thing whose boots you lick. The Headmaster made me aware of that little tidbit too. My owl is leaving for the ministry this afternoon. My new friend Rufus is going to put a bounty on you, so please do venture out into the public eye.”

“I’ll bring the girl. You will remove the memory in front of me and swear an oath that it is the memory in question.”

“Deal. You realize that after tonight, the next time I see you I will kill you?”

“You can delude yourself all you want, boy! I am ten times the wizard you will ever be.”

“Yet here we are and only one of us has a wand, you spineless sack of shit. Yours are behind that rock.” Harry said pointing to a rock typically used as a congregation point for students waiting for their friends on trips into Hogsmeade.

Snape walked over next to the pile of books and boxes. There was a distinct lack of ingredients, but his master’s cabinets were stocked with supplies that were removed from Hogwarts over several years – no terrible loss except for a few expensive items, which could be purchased with Dungbeetle’s money. He picked up the wands only to have them turn into rubber chickens.

“Oh dear.” Harry said with mock sincerity. “The house elves must have packed your real wands and left those out. I’ll make certain to congratulate them when I get back. See you tonight, Snivellus.”

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## Chapter 20 – Your best foot forward

Colleen Isaccs looked out at the morning light from the first floor staff room at St. Mungo's. It had been a fairly quiet night. She had even been able to head up to Maternity to assist in a difficult delivery. Both mother and baby boy were doing fine. She spent the next hour watching the tiny bundles of life in the Narcissa Malfoy neonatal care ward. Two baby girls and the new arrival. The six pound nine ounce boy had the full attention of Melanie Rivers, the night shift Maternity witch.

"Things staying quiet down in trauma?"

"They are. I wanted to come up and see how little Gavin is doing. Being up here calms me."

"You're not having one of your nervous episodes again?" Melanie asked with concern for her friend.

"Fraid so. It just started about an hour ago." Colleen answered shaking her head. Her 'gift' was almost classifiable as a seer trait. She had feelings – a nervous anxiety if you will of bad things about to happen. Some of her coworkers downstairs referred to her as the 'Harbinger of Doom'. Not even a couple of weeks ago, she had shown up five hours before shift, unable to stay at her flat. It was the night Azkaban fell. She paced the hallways, did crossword puzzles in the break room and generally unhinged second shift with her behavior. Then the reports of fighting at Azkaban came in. They weren't joking about whether she was acting nutters anymore. The waiting was awful. They brought extra staff and supplies down to trauma. Someone turned on the wireless for any news. DMLE headquarters gave no new updates. Then, shortly before ten thirty in the evening, the first injured arrived. Everyone moved to help and the first wave of aurors were tended to, following the professional traditions of one of the finest magical hospitals in the world.

The thing that shocked everyone the most was that there was no second wave of injured. Less than ten came back from Azkaban. It was probably her worst night as a healer ever. As if things could not get any worse there were scattered reports of Dementor attacks coming in. Still later, a young woman rushed in floating a man who

had been wounded by a vampire of all things. What in the name of all that is magical was happening out there? Colleen worked on the young red headed boy. She wasn't certain, but she thought he was one of Arthur and Molly's boys. The new war was already scarring young men and women.

She recognized Conrad Dawlish on the next table. They were not really friends, more like passing acquaintances from school and various Ministry functions. The auror, who used to help her with defense homework in trade for potions and herbology would never walk again. He would float on a seat attached to a medical grade magic carpet – the only type of carpets exempted from the import ban. She had spent a few nights talking with him and supporting him during what was clearly going to be a long and grueling period of rehabilitation.

Her 'gift' was what could only be described as a cursed blessing. It cost her her marriage to Jeff. It cost her her two boys in an ugly custody battle, which she lost because of Jeff's blood purity and money. Her boys resented her for that. The oldest, Perry just about to start Hogwarts barely speaks to her on visiting weekends. It wounded her to hear him say that she cares more about some strangers at her job than he and his younger brother Jerome. The loss of custody caused her to throw herself into her work with a renewed fervor. It was all she had left. Since the fall of Azkaban, her usual twelve hour shifts had been replaced with sixteen or eighteen hour shifts. Putting back together the pieces of the survivors from the prison battle had opened the wounds from the previous war.

Part of the burden of her 'gift' was that whenever she was nervous or anxious, people would pester her to no end! It wasn't like a switch that she could turn off and on. It wasn't a spell that you could finite! She couldn't grab a crystal ball or scrying glass and request clarification! No, she would just be nervous and anxious. Everyone knows that the last thing a nervous or anxious person needs is someone annoying them! To make matters worse, the few times she would venture to parties and various other functions her colleagues would introduce her to their spouses, friends and children. They would then proceed to frustrate her by asking for tarot readings, runic dice interpretations and anything else they could come up with. Like

she was some soothsayer at a stand in Knockturn Alley for Circe's sake!

The oncoming shift was three mediwizards and one mediwitch intern. They were an experienced crew and she often covered for Abe Christopher while he fought his political battles in one inane meeting after another. Fixing people was easy. Fighting with other departments for funding and personnel was the hard part. Harder still was placating the attitudes of the healers under her charge. She was often surprised that despite their healer's creed that more dark wizards and witches did not come from the ranks of healers. It was not unheard of for healers to develop 'god complexes', believing themselves above errors, holding someone's very life in the magical palm of your hand. She didn't envy Abraham's position at all.

"Staying late again, Colleen?" He asked in his smooth baritone voice.

"I thought I would hang around for a bit. I'm a bit nervous today." She said looking off out the window of the staff room.

"How long?" Abe was respectful of her special ability and her skill as a mediwitch. Her department head put her in charge of the night shift at a very young age much to the displeasure of several others who had seniority over her. Abe managed to convince her to take muggle anti-depressants to help with her depression over the divorce. It was a poor substitute, but it was something.

"About three hours now. Here's the turnover list for your crew. Do you have the morning edition of the Prophet?" She said nibbling on a breakfast pastry. One of the useful perks of her position was to ensure that her favorite items were always available. She and the head of the hospitals small clan of elves had a wonderful working relationship.

"Well make yourself comfortable and try to relax. Hopefully, it's just a false alarm. Do you have the boy's this weekend?"

"Yes."

"I've got some tickets to a friendly between Falmouth and Puddlemere that I can't use. Anya scheduled one of her social events

and I get to go play the dashing trophy husband. Why don't you take them?"

"That would be great. Thank you."

She tried to rest in the break room, but gave up and went out to the main desk in the trauma ward. She felt more comfortable there anyway. It was ten minutes after eight in the morning when the floor alarm sounded. In the fire was the face of a floor kiddie from DMLE.

"This is Healer Issacs. What can I do for you?"

"DMLE has just received an alarm from Gringott's. We have aurors en route to the scene. The supervisor requested that I make you aware this." The young man's voice cracked slightly showing the all the signs of puberty.

"Thank the supervisor and keep us informed." She answered politely.

Fifteen minutes later the fires roared to life as the first auror came through floating a body behind him. Gordon and Heather took over for the auror as Colleen waited for the auror to speak.

"It's pretty bad at the bank. More are coming through. I've got at least four dead and seven injured. Most of it looks like blunt force trauma. Damn Goblins took five whole minutes to unseal their bloody wards!"

"Thanks. John, call the front desk. Tell them that we have a stage two emergency in Trauma. Heather, get Abe from the morning meeting with the director. The first people to come running are usually your fellow interns. Put them on vital sign monitoring and injury diagnostics. You! Bring that one to this table." She said the last to an auror, who had just stepped through floating a second body of a young woman with bandages raggedly covering her right leg. Abe's crew was used to taking orders from her, though Gordon held seniority and chafed a bit under it.

With a wave of her oak and unicorn hair wand, the healer sterilized the table. A second wave activated a dicta-quill. She began her notes as she vanished the bandages with a third spell. "Patient is female in her late teens, not conscious. Diagnostics show evidence of a

concussion, extensive bruising to the upper torso, dislocated right shoulder, fractured right hip, three fractures in the left leg and four in the right leg. Patient is missing right foot. Auror! Go back and find her foot! I may still be able to reattach it if you hurry! Did you administer any blood replenishing potions? Right. Patient has been given two blood replenishing potions by aurors on scene. Staunching blood flow from lower right leg. Abe, help me with this one. An auror is bringing her foot. I'll stabilize her, while you work on the reattachment. Turning over recording quill to Senior Healer Abraham Christopher." Colleen listened to Abe's melodic voice immediately launch into more detailed descriptions of the patient's injuries.

For the next two minutes, Colleen continued to tend to the wounds on the girls torso and set the dislocated shoulder. The auror looking a bit squeamish, when he returned floating the severed foot.

"Found it underneath the overturned cart. Thought it was part of a dead goblin at first."

She thanked the auror despite not really caring about where it was. "What do you think, Abe?"

"If we put it back on, we can't get rid of her leg bones for at least two days to make sure the foot holds and doesn't go gangrene. It's a lot of pain to be in, but I think it beats having to get a prosthetic foot."

"Concur. We reattach. Heather, get over here and assist Healer Christopher. He is going to do a limb reattachment. You'll want to see this."

The intern moved over to the table and took a look at the patient and gasped.

"What is it Heather?" Abe said not looking up from his intricate wand work.

"It's just I recognize her from the latest Teen Witch Weekly! She's Susan Bones, as in engaged to Harry Potter, Susan Bones."

Colleen almost tuned Heather out when the words Teen Witch Weekly were said. Heather's obsession was just a tad annoying, but

the names Harry Potter and Susan Bones brought her right back into the conversation.

"Are you certain?" She and Abe both asked at the same time.

"There's the engagement ring and her head of family signet ring." Heather said breathlessly. Abe met Colleen's eyes and he gestured with his head back to the trauma desk.

"Right." She went to the floo and grabbed a handful of powder. "Security Desk."

"Security desk, this is Amanda."

"Amanda, it's Colleen. We've got a VIP in trauma. Can you send a pair of guards down and let Charles know that once the patient is stable, we will want to move her to the special place?"

"The special place? Who is the patient?" The witch on the other end of the connection asked with sudden interest.

"Not at liberty to discuss. Tell Charles to come down here and I will discuss it with him personally." Colleen said ending the connection. She walked back to where Heather and Abe were continuing their work.

"Abe, as soon as she is stable, we should move her to the 'special place'. Security is going to send some people down and I requested Charles to come down in person. Keep an eye on people coming through the floo and into the area. The last thing we need is Death Eaters in the ward. Heather, not a word to anyone about the identity of our patient." She said in a hushed whisper.

The 'special place' was the floor four and a half – the fidelius high security ward. There were four private rooms off the hidden partial floor. The chief of security, Charles Thompson was the secret keeper. Less than a dozen people knew the exact location of the ward, though most of the staff knew of it's rumored existence. The last person to use it was Gilderoy Lockhart, when he was first brought over from Hogwarts. The hospital hid him from his adoring public for a month before finally transferring him to long-term spell damage.



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"Good morning Minister." The man said taking his seat. His words were heavily accented Italian.

Rufus Scrimgeour didn't really want to have this meeting, but as many new leaders learn that eventually the position seemingly takes on a life of it's own. The Vatican emissary sipped at his coffee.

"To what do I owe this pleasure, Cardinal Arellano?"

"Ah, straight to business then. I was hoping to engage in a few minutes of idle chatter, but alas no. Very well, the Vatican is hearing rumors that you are founding an army here in the isles. We do not like these rumors."

"I do not know of this army you speak of. I have created an auxiliary force that augments our current auror contingent against the threat of a reemerging Dark Lord. This force is not authorized to operate outside of Britain."

"I see. Much like the politicians in the normal world, you choose your words and descriptions carefully. Proverbs tells us that 'If a ruler listens to lies, all his officials become wicked.' From what my sources say, the corruption of your previous ministry was quite complete."

Rufus regarded the Vatican wizard carefully. One of the great secrets of the Church was the number of magical folks in its rank. Magical children are often discovered by their parents from their outbursts of accidental magic. In many cases the parents would seek out an actual exorcist. What they often received was a potion and charms to help suppress the accidental releases and in some situations active recruitment followed. The Church was pragmatic enough to level the playing field with the magical world. Much of the dark ages were the direct result between the open warfare that was waged between the magical world and the Catholic Church during that era.

"I doubt the Dark Lord trying to overthrow my country will care about the Vatican accords. He will drag the world down the same path as Grindelwald."

"You make the situation sound desperate. For the moment this appears to be a regional problem. I shall recommend that your problem warrant further monitoring. This would be a very bad time to attract further attention from Rome, Interim Minister Scrimgeour. Be certain this auxiliary force does not become an army. I fear you would not like the outcome. Your sins will certainly be judged in the next life by the Creator. Your gifts that you have been blessed with are twisted to serve your own foolish ideals and perpetuate your decadent society. My gifts serve the almighty and the words and wisdom guide my wand. Good day, Interim Minister." The Cardinal delivered his not-so subtle warning, stood and left.

"Great! Just what I needed this morning – threats from religious zealots! At least, the day can't get much worse." He snarled.

Rufus Scrimgeour was a practical man. Deep down, he knew it was not wise to tempt fate – fate possesses a cruel streak.

"Minister, there has been an incident at Gringott's! There are several dead and many injured."

The Interim Minister of Magic shook his head knowing that fate was playing with him. It was going to be another long day. "Lead on Jennings. We'd best get there and sort this out. I want to know what happened and why. Get the Head of Goblin Relations to meet us there."

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A depilation charm would have sufficed, but there was something refreshing about the click of the scissors and the feel of the razor on his freshly shaved head and face. He regarded himself in the mirror almost like a child. The reflected stranger in front of him tilted his head in curiosity. Some of the hair went into the dissolving solution along with many other ingredients.

He looked at the unfurled scroll before him unable to resist running his hand across his smooth scalp for at least the hundredth time. His assistant looked at him and nodded his head. He removed his shirt and tossed it aside, laying bare his entire upper torso. The assistant

then picked up the one of the twelve bowls in front and a tiny brush in his other hand. "Are you certain?"

He nodded wondering if Jotunheim actually existed. Either way he would have his answer soon, very soon. Both men kept quiet while the brush painted intricate runes on his body.

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The evening brought a slight chill to Harry. He felt more anxious than ever. The entire day had left him feeling drained and out of sorts. He stood a dozen feet inside the wards. Flitwick, McGonagall, Sprout, Hesita Jones and Peter Abbott stood near him. His head of house was openly expressing her displeasure at Harry's presence. Sitting on a rock trying to determine where the last twelve days of her life had gone was the obliviated Penelope Clearwater-Weasley, minus the collar of ensnarement she had been wearing. Harry had asked Dumbledore whether he was going to be watching from the castle. Harry had been surprised when the aging headmaster responded no.

"You have your task to complete this evening, Harry and I have mine," had been the only cryptic response he had received. Over the shoulder of the headmaster, Harry spied the Nigellus portrait; who merely shrugged. Harry didn't like not knowing what Dumbledore was planning. Harry was new to this game of secrecy and innuendo, but was finding himself a fast learner.

They had descended the steps together and Harry walked by his side to the great hall. There the five that now stood by him waited for their instructions from Dumbledore. He whispered to McGonagall only to have her glare sternly at him. He simply smiled and offered her a lemon drop. Fawkes flashed into existence on the man's shoulder startling the Animagus in front of him.

"I bid you farewell and good fortune this evening. Fawkes tells me it is time to depart. Good luck with the exchange." Dumbledore said.

Flitwick looked up from admiring the Marauder's Map. All three of the professors had been quite interested in the artifact. "Mr. Potter, our guests are just entering the edge of the map. Snape has both Mr.

Weasley and Ms. Lovegood with him. I fear he may execute her in front of you to attempt to provoke you."

"Who else is with him?" Sprout asked helping Penelope to her feet. Though Harry rarely had any interaction with the Head of Hufflepuff, she seemed even more pleasantly disposed towards him than he remembered. Harry attributed it to the fact that despite Susan's shortcomings in herbology that Susan was well liked by her Head of House.

"Mulciber, two Avery's, Pettigrew and one of the Travers boys. No sign of their master."

"Could one of them be using polyjuice?" Mr. Abbott asked.

"It's possible, Pettigrew did help make the map and there is another one like it in Riddle's headquarters. He probably could devise a way to fool it, but it did show Crouch during the tournament. I was just confused and thought it was Crouch Senior."

"I hope to spend some time studying this in great detail with some input from Mr. Lupin." Flitwick said.

"We are going to make copies for the teachers and the security force the Minister is going to station here during the school year. Students looking for broom closets should find out pretty quick." Harry said with a dry and mirthless chuckle.

"Sadly, I wish that was all there was to worry about during the upcoming school year, Mr. Potter. This will be my third war and my old bones grow weary of the senseless death and destruction." Flitwick said. Though the Head of Ravenclaw was not an official member of the Order, he had insisted on being here. Harry had spoken to him and touched on the subject of private lessons. It had taken revealing the first two lines of the prophecy to convince the charms master, but he promised to help Harry in every way possible.

"We'd best put the map away with Pettigrew coming. No sense in making it obvious, we are using it. Do you mind obliterating Penny again?" Harry said.

Flitwick folded the map carefully and stuck it in his coat pocket before turning to look at the young woman, who just a scant few years ago he had nominated as a prefect. His normally cheerful demeanor disappeared. "Were it up to me, I would perform a memory charm on myself to forget that I ever had any expectations of you. *Obliviate!*" Penny stared blankly at him for ten seconds before coming to her senses. Her vacant expression was replaced with a defiant look.

"He will win. You must know that. You have no chance."

"Tell me something, Clearwater. If what you say is true, why am I still even here." Harry replied coldly. "Tom Riddle is a powerful wizard, but he is sloppy and prone to mistakes. At least Grindelwald was able to make a lasting impression. What has your precious godfather accomplished? He keeps saying my luck is going to run out. That may be true, but not before his luck runs out. When I am finished with him, the most he will ever be is an entry in *The Rise and Fall of Dark Wizards*."

To say the rest of the group was shocked at Harry's proclamation was an understatement. McGonagall stepped beside him and whispered, "Harry! What do you think you are doing?"

"He'll look at her memories. That taunt is specifically intended for him. I want him angry the next time we fight. He makes mistakes when he is angry. I'll need every advantage I can get." He whispered the barely audible reply.

The Deputy Headmistress started to reply to Harry, but the sounds of people approaching alerted them to the presence of the Death Eater contingent. She turned instead with her wand already in hand as the group of eight approached. Six wore their standard Death Eater garb, though Snape and Pettigrew opted not to wear their respective masks. Fred and Luna wore simple cloaks. Fred's eyes darted around, while Luna's simply stared into the distance.

"Mr. Weasley, Ms. Lovegood, are you okay?" Flitwick shouted. Fred replied and Luna simply nodded.

"Let us make our exchange and be done with this." Snape said.

"Why did you bring both of them, Mister Snape?" McGonagall questioned.

"I thought perhaps Potter would like to see the girl one last time before she is disposed of."

"You animal!" Minerva screamed.

"Relax Professor," Harry said. "Are you willing to honor our agreement, Snape?"

"Do it, Potter."

"Potter! What are you doing?"

Harry tapped his temple with his wand and withdrew the selected memory. Placing it into a vial he withdrew from his pocket. "On my magic, this is the memory of what I witnessed before I destroyed Dumbledore's office. Clearwater, take this. Send Fred and Luna at the same time. They cross the wards at the same time."

Severus enjoyed the shocked look on McGonagall's face as she stared numbly at Potter. "Are you insane?" She screamed. "I will not allow this!"

"Move it Clearwater! Now! I don't really give a knut what you and Dumbledore will and will not allow. I am getting my friends back." Harry stepped in time with Penelope, shielding her from the Order members as Luna and Fred moved forward. Harry stopped and let Percy's traitorous wife walk the last twenty paces. There was a slight shimmer as the trio passed through the perimeter of the wards. Once clear Penelope stepped to the former potions professor and had a wand pressed into her hands. Fred dragged Luna behind a large rock as directed by Professor Sprout.

"Again your sheer incompetence staggers me, Potter! I shall enjoy giving this to my Lord." Snape gloated.

"Hello Harry. On behalf of the entire Death Eater organization I would like to thank you for making this evening and all the deaths leading up to this evening possible. Without your letting me go, none of this

would have been possible. Maybe that cute little girl you're screwing would still have her mum and aunt?"

"Potter, no! They are trying to goad you into casting a spell from the inside of the boundaries out. It would allow them to return fire. You have what you came for, leave now!"

"Remember my promise, Snivellus. Next time I see you, you die." Harry said still pointing his wand at his former professor.

"I am sure like all your other pathetic efforts it will fail, you son of a mudblood whore." Snape said causing all the Death Eaters to laugh as they began backing away. As soon as they were out of sight, McGonagall rounded on Harry.

"Do you have any idea what you have done?"

Harry was saved from replying when Luna began to scream at the top of her lungs. Fred tried to hold her, but she curled into a fetal ball. Eventually, they stunned her and floated her body up to the castle.

Harry didn't stop to watch Fred's reunion with the rest of his family and Angelina. Alicia had been invited, but had refused. She still wasn't handling the loss of George very well. He followed Professor Flitwick to the hospital ward in silence. Inside he saw Remus still resting. When he wasn't at Harry and Susan's house for lessons he was here continuing to recover from his fight with the other werewolves. Harry pulled up a chair.

Madame Pomfrey revived Luna, who immediately launched into a fresh round of screaming. The noise woke Remus.

"What in Merlin's name?"

"The Death Eaters did something to Luna. She won't stop screaming. I am guessing they had her under the Imperius curse so she wouldn't act out during the exchange."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Was there a change of plans? I had thought the exchange was going to be for Fred."

"Yeah, we got him too. He is down with his family." Harry said wanting to change the subject. "How was Susan's lesson today?"

"Oh, I didn't get to go. Madame Pomfrey kept me here and gave me a sleeping draught. A few of my lingering injuries are not healing as well as she had expected."

The nagging sense of wrongness returned in full force. Harry immediately stood up and went to the fireplace. Dobby answered the firecall.

"No, Missus Susan has not come back since she left this morning." The sinking feeling in his chest grew.

Harry ran over his options. "Dobby, does Trixie know where Susan is?"

"Dobby is checking with Trixie."

There was a long agonizing wait, before Dobby returned. The little elf's voice was a high pitched squeal, "Mister Harry Potter! Trixie does not know where Harry Potter's Susan is! She is hidden from Trixie's magic!" Several people in the hospital wing had heard the shout.

Harry broke the connection and grabbed another handful of powder. He whispered the private floo address of Rufus Scrimgeour.

"Harry! My staff has been trying to track you down all day. Ms. Bones was injured at Gringott's this morning. She is in the high security ward at St. Mungo's. She's resting and out of surgery, but she was injured rather severely."

"What? How? Why didn't you owl?"

"We tried, but the owls didn't leave the ministry." Harry realized Dumbledore must have tightened the wards in preparation for the exchange this evening.

"How do I get there?"



"Check with the security desk on the second floor. I have a pair of aurors guarding her around the clock."

"How did this happen?" Harry asked in a frustrated manner.

"A wizard named Marcus Flint went on a killing spree inside the bank. He was targeting specifically goblins. The Bank's defenses eliminated him, but were designed to attack any one holding a wand. Four people were killed and seven more including your fiancée were injured. I'll contact Jennings and have him meet you at the hospital. He can brief you in full detail. The goblins initially tried to justify their use of force, but when they realized just who they had injured they started backtracking pretty quickly."

"Thank you, Minister. I'll head off to St. Mungo's as soon as I can leave the castle."

Harry turned and looked at Remus, who was already dressing. "You're still hurt, Remus. You'd be useless in a fight. Professor Flitwick, if it is not too much to ask would you accompany me to St. Mungo's. Susan was injured."

The Ravenclaw professor looked at the silenced, but still obviously screaming Luna Lovegood and then to the nurse. Madam Pomfrey shook her head, "You'll do more good there than here, Filius. I'll do my best, but we may need to transfer her to the hospital anyway."

In the end Harry ended up with both professors Flitwick and Sprout, who insisted on going to see Susan. He sensed McGonagall wanted to accompany him as well, but with Dumbledore's absence she was in charge of the castle. As they left the ward, Harry saw the ashen face of Neville Longbottom standing in the hallway. Professor Sprout said a few words to the shaken teenager. It did not appear to console him as he punched the wall with his hand in anger.

Ten minutes later the trio, plus the Minister's aide Jennings were at the second floor security desk. The guard there made them sign their name with a bloodquill for verification before handing them each a slip of paper.

*The High Security Ward of St. Mungo's is located on floor four and one half. The button to access it will now be visible in the lift behind you. Be prepared to surrender your wand upon exiting the lift.*

There was a single mediwitch and two aurors waiting when the lift's gate opened to floor four and one half. Jennings assured Harry that the two aurors and their replacements had been screened for the Dark Mark before being assigned here for twelve hour shifts.

"I am Colleen Isaccs", the woman said offering her hand.

"How is she?"

"Both her legs are still broken. We can't remove the bones and regrow them until we can be sure that her right foot will hold up to reattachment. She's immobilized and numbed from the waist down. All her other injuries have been treated. Mr. Potter, even if she manages to keep her foot there will most likely be some lingering neurological effects. It will be two days before I'll know for certain and be able to fix her legs."

"Can the rest of this wait? I'd really like to see her."

The mediwitch smiled and gestured for the door. Flitwick and Sprout motioned for him to go ahead. He entered the room. Had Harry stopped to admire the room, he would have noticed that the furnishings were top quality and the overall layout of the room was designed to promote cheerfulness. Instead he was focused on the person in the bed in front of him.

"Hi." Not exactly his best lead in. He pulled a chair up to her and sat down.

Susan didn't say anything. He could tell she was upset. She had obviously been crying.

"I'm sorry. I just found out about all this. Tonks took me to Hogwart's and I've been there all day. I should have gone with you to the bank." He said taking her hand. Susan was looking anywhere but at him.

He sat there with her in silence for probably five minutes, perhaps five of the longest minutes in his life. "Come on Susan, talk to me. Say something! Yell at me! Call me an insensitive prat! Anything!"

"I've been awake since three o'clock this afternoon. I've sat here for seven hours wondering where in Merlin's name you were and you have the gall to whine about five effing minutes of silent treatment!" Susan snapped at him before beginning to cry again.

Harry was stunned by her outburst, but moved in close to hug her. Instead of saying anything more he just tried his best to hold her.

"Oh Harry! I didn't mean that! I've just been stuck here and being angry with myself. It's not your fault I'm worthless in a fight!"

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" Harry said drying some of her tears. He then handed her a glass of water.

Slowly Susan began to give the details of what she could remember of the fight. The last thing she remembered was running for the carts.

"So let me get this straight, you destroy one of the four enchanted stone gargoyles protecting Gringott's and you consider yourself useless in a fight? I am guessing the Goblins are figuring out if they paid too much for them." Harry asked.

"I didn't exactly win, did I?"

"You were outnumbered four to one from what I hear and no one else was doing anything! Still you managed to take one of them down. That's nothing to be ashamed of!" Harry protested. Seeing his argument was bearing some fruit he pressed on, "Did I fight the dragon in the tournament? Sweet Merlin no! I out flew it. You're plenty good at fighting. You just need to work on your escaping."

Gradually over the next ten minutes Harry began to pull Susan out of her depression. Harry promised her that he would get answers from the Goblins. Susan was worried that she was going to lose her foot. Harry did his best to reassure her. He updated her on the prisoner exchange. Luna's predicament brought a flush of anger to Harry's cheeks. Another ten minutes passed before there was a knock at the

door and the two professors entered. The four of them chatted for another half hour. Healer Issaccs returned with a sleeping draught. Harry gave her a kiss before she drank it and offered to stay, but Susan reminded him that he was needed at Hogwart's. The mediwitch said that the draught would wear off by nine in the morning. Harry promised to be there when she woke up tomorrow. Susan smiled at him and said that if he wasn't here by one minute after nine, he should start looking for places to hide.

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"Where is Greyback?" Lord Voldemort's voice boomed impatiently. A mild breeze blew in from the east causing a slight chill in the evening air.

"He has been out of communication for the past three days, Milord. A few of our people saw him briefly yesterday, but he apparated away without giving any orders. I have some of our people searching for him." A werewolf, who had not identified himself answered.

Lord Voldemort sat astride his Necrodragaon outside the ruined barn about twenty kilometers east of the forbidden forest. The area was overgrown with vegetation and showed all the signs of at least a dozen years of neglect. McNair and four other new recruits accompanied him. Greyback's pack of thirty werewolves stood in front of him. Only fourteen were actual witches and wizards. The rest were either squibs or muggles who had been forcefully brought into the magical world. Greyback had an eye for talent as most of the new ones looked strong and able bodied. All of the muggles and some of the magical werewolves stared in unmasked awe at the Necrodragon.

"I grow weary of these delays." Voldemort did not like the current turn of events. Fenir Greyback was many things, brutal, egotistical criminally insane, but he was never tardy. He looked at his wristwatch. Precisely nine o'clock, Severus would be arriving at Hogwart's to retrieve Penny.

The air became thick with magic. Voldemort had been on both sides of an ambush enough times in his life to recognize one. Portkeys were delivering something into their midst at the same time he felt anti-apparition wards spring into place. The screams of the werewolf

pack reached his ears as he recognized acromantulas, perhaps two score maybe more of the spiders arrived. Some of the converted muggles were actually using firearms against the giant spiders. He reared the Necrodragon and crushed two with it's massive forelegs.

Drawing his yew wand he began casting precision curses. With the spiders appearing in their midst, some of the spells were poorly aimed and ended up injuring other werewolves. McNair cast a few spells wildly before grabbing his massive axe and leaping into the fray. One massive acromantula snatched a werewolf up in its mandibles and split the man in two. It leapt over into the clear area around Voldemort and the Dragon.

"Die miserable Humans!" The spiders voice cracked. It hissed as a cutting curse hit it from one of his Death Eaters, but instead of leaping towards the attacker, the monster sprang into battle with the dragon though the beast was twice it's size. Voldemort dived off the side and gave the dragon a mental command to destroy the spider. He rolled to his feet and blew the back half off of another spider as he cleared away from where the two monsters fought each other. A pair of the muggle werewolves sprinted towards the treeline to the west when something nearly as big as the largest spider came out of the woods and pounced on him. It was a Cerebus, an all too familiar three headed dog. One of the werewolves was crushed underfoot and the second was snatched into the air by the center head only to have the other two heads tear at the man's body like some rawhide chew toy.

Acromantulas and a Cerebus, at least he knew who his enemy was now. The only question was where was his old school chum?

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Harry and the two professors retrieved their wands and headed for the lift. When the doors opened, he saw Madame Pomfrey there with Luna on a stretcher. Two mediwizards were already diagnosing her with their wands. The young Ravenclaw witch had her hands bound to the sides of the stretcher. If one looked close enough they would see where her hands had clawed at her face. The scars had been freshly healed and would fade over time. The aging mediwitch looked older than Harry had ever recalled seeing her.

"How is she?" Professor Flitwick asked.

"I've had to bring her here, Filius. She is beyond my capabilities." Madame Pomfrey said shaking her head sadly.

"You did your best, Poppy. It's in their hands now."

Visiting Susan had helped Harry, but seeing his friend in such a condition brought his anger back in full force. Riddle would pay for this! Snape would pay for this! Pettigrew and every last one of those fuckers would pay for this! Professor Sprout placed a calming hand on his shoulder and began to lead him away. Luna's Head of House elected to remain behind with Madame Pomfrey.

Returning through the floo to Hogwart's, Pomona Sprout instructed him to get some rest and recommended that he stay in Ravenclaw tower tonight. Harry asked for the password and thanked her as he began walking towards the tower. A plan he had thought of several days ago and discarded out of hand resurfaced in his mind. Harry realized it could work, but he needed help with this and he knew there was only one person he could turn to.

Arriving at the entrance to the Ravenclaw Dormitories, he spoke the pass phrase 'Hope endures all hardships' and entered. He felt everyone's eyes on him, but no one could muster the courage to say anything to him. Harry walked directly to Hermione.

"I need to speak with Ginny. Where is she?"

"She's in the third year girls room. She's very upset right now. Neville laid into her something fierce. You're not going to do anything are you?" Hermione asked in a hushed voice. Ron was sitting next to her. His eyes opened wide as the possibility that Harry would do something to his sister registered on his brain.

"No. I just need to talk to her." He said reassuring her.

"Okay. I trust you Harry. Don't worry, the steps to the girls dorms won't turn into a slide during the summertime."

"Thanks." He replied as he started across the room. Fred was sitting on a couch with Angelina Johnson protectively curled up on him. He nodded solemnly at Harry. It was a face that lacked any hint of the surviving twin's usual mirth.

A quick walk up the steps and he arrived at door to the third year Ravenclaw girl's quarters. He knocked on the door.

"For the last time, Hermione. I don't want to talk right now. Leave me alone!" Ginny's voice hissed from the other side of the door.

"It's not Hermione. It's Harry. Open the door. I need your help."

The door opened slowly. Ginny's tearstained face regarded him. "What do you want, Harry?" she asked with a hint of fear in her voice.

"Not here, inside."

He ushered her back in the room and after ensuring that they were alone, with the exception of Ginny's pet pygmy puff. He used his wand to lock the door and silence the room.

"You're holding yourself responsible for what happened to Luna aren't you?" Ginny simply nodded.

"It's just like me with Sirius. It hasn't really gotten better with time. I doubt it ever will."

"What's your point, Harry?" Ginny said with a hint of her temper returning. Good, Harry would need her to have some of her old fire.

"Well I think it is high time for those bastards to get some payback. I've got a plan and I need you to pull it off. Are you in?"

"I'll do it! What do you have in mind?"

Harry began to explain his idea and what he required of her. Ginny Weasley's perception of Harry Potter changed that night. It may have been possible that she never really knew him at all. At the end of it, he offered her a choice – either an oath or obliviation. She hesitated for only a moment and then gave her oath.

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Aragog circled the dragon after being knocked backwards. The ancient creature's sight was going, but the dragon was difficult to miss. The centaur Firenze had confirmed what Aragog already knew. His time in this existence was coming to a close. Some nights, a palsy would afflict some of his legs and even the medicine that Friend Hagrid brought him did little to stop it. His choices were limited to fighting and probably dying in a great battle or cowering in his lair suckling pig's blood tainted with elixirs to cheat death by another day or week. He was Aragog, the spider-king and he would die on his eight legs and earn his place in the afterlife! The dragon's claws gouged a trench into the earth as Aragog backpedaled shielding his multi-faceted eyes from the spraying dirt and rocks. The thing in front of him felt no pain, something the spider-king could not say as one of his legs was now completely useless. To regain the offensive, Aragog would need help. Most of his grown children that readily volunteered for a chance to drink human blood were still fighting in this glorious slaughter. The survivors would eventually battle with each other for the right to be his successor. The air was so thick with the smell of blood Aragog could taste it. Suddenly, the dragon's head snapped hard to the right as a rock the size of one of Mosag's eggs hit the side of its head.

Friend Hagrid's brother stepped into the clearing. A few of Aragog's more rebellious children had not taken the warnings to stay away from Grawp when the giant was brought to the forest. Aragog had less rebellious children shortly afterwards. As the dead creature turned to face the club-wielding humanoid running across the clearing, Aragog made his move. He landed on the back of the dragon and bit into the plating at the base of the neck. Had it been alive the dragon would have been screaming. The giant blocked the claws with its club and plowed into the rearing dragon with his full weight. Dragon, giant and acromantula tumbled to the ground. Aragog felt the pain of being crushed by the combined weight. His back legs were crushed and in the ensuing struggles one of the dragon's rear legs clawed open his underbelly. He felt wet and squishy and knew that it was his end. In one final act of defiance, the spider-king latched its mandibles onto the claw that had disemboweled him and squeezed tasting his own ichor which coated the dead creature's appendage. Seconds before



the light faded from his many eyes, the spider-king felt the satisfying crack of bone as his mandibles severed the clawed foot. The bright light flashing before him, was it the maw of the afterlife opening for him? No, it was just the humanoid structure bursting into flames.

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Voldemort continued firing spells. Carcasses of arachnid and dead bodies surrounded him. His dragon would soon best the spider. It was a possible avenue of escape. The cerebus still stood, but one of its heads no longer barked and snapped at the pair of werewolves fighting it. It finished both of them, but stumbled and fell to the ground. Only McNair, one other Death Eater and a paltry few of Greyback's pack remained. He would need to fight his way to freedom. His wand conjured shards of ice, which impaled yet another arachnid. A killing curse stopped one in mid leap. He sidestepped the dead creatures forward momentum. The loud clang of two axes meeting caught his attention. He spun to see McNair fighting a large man with his own axe. Voldemort saw that the man was completely shaven and covered in runes. He recognized the runes from the many times he had employed giants in his service. They increased strength and speed while augmenting the giant's innate magical resistance. Without the hair and beard, Voldemort barely recognized his former classmate Rubeus Hagrid. Hagrid was bellowing for some strange battlecry. What could 'Norbert' possibly mean?

He was about to intervene when he saw a glint of magic from the woods. He banished the corpse of the acromantula he had just killed into its path and was sprayed with its gore. There at the edge of the forest, with his wand raised over his head like a sword was Albus Dumbledore. A giant was charging into the clearing towards his Necrodragon as the barn where most of the surviving werewolves sought shelter exploded in a ball of flames.

Lord Voldemort could appreciate a superbly executed ambush. Well done to the Supreme Mugwump and his creature keeper. He must have others still in the woods to maintain the anti-apparition and portkey wards. Dumbledore was fresh and he was not. Dumbledore was prepared and he was not. None of that mattered. Now oblivious to the carnage surrounding him, he stalked forward to face the

ancient charlatan whom the public desperately believes to be the 'only one he ever feared'. It was time to correct that falsehood once and for all.

## Chapter 21 – When Giants Roamed the Land

Susan was angry with herself. She lashed out at Harry for no reason other than the fact he was a convenient target. While she was sitting in a hospital bed berating herself for getting the stuffing knocked out of her, Harry was out trying to save Fred and Luna's lives.

She tried her Occlumency exercises with only moderate success. How her scatterbrained friend Hannah had ever gotten this was positively mind boggling, but then again Hannah had done so out of need. She wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, so she might as well do something while she was here. She focused on her meditation and breathing for several minutes. Susan found her emotional center and began the slow process of calming her mind to erect her nascent mental tripwires. A half formed layer began to come together as she fed it memories. Hannah said to always start with a happy layer. It makes no difference to the person attacking you, but you feel better as you construct your outer layers. Needing a bit of cheer, she fed it memories of her triumphs in life. Learning to ride a horse and a broom, flat out destroying her Ancient Runes OWL, and being held by Harry.

The healer had brought Susan her wand that was retrieved from the bank. She had felt slightly naked without her wand. She checked over her willow wand carefully. When she looked up the mediwitch had a rag and a small tin of wand polish.

"How did you know?" Susan asked amazed. The woman in front of her was awfully perceptive. Maybe she was like Hannah.

"It's a trade secret. They wouldn't want me to let you in on it." The mediwitch said with a wink. "Actually, it is quite common when a person has suffered a combat related injury. When separated from their wand for a length of time, they will go through a form of separation anxiety. We keep wand polish in all of our recovery rooms for this reason. There's a deep relationship between a witch and her wand."

Susan smiled and set about cleaning the soot and blemishes off of her wand. Impulsively, she thought of Harry's patronus lesson.

“Go ahead, I know you want to cast a spell.”

“What?”

“It’s the second phase. First clean the wand and next cast a spell to prove that you are still magical. Your subconscious is trying to help you cope. So what spell are you going to cast, Susan?”

“I wanted to summon my patronus.”

“Really, let me see.”

“*Expecto Patronum!*” Her stallion was pretty misty, but still corporeal enough. It was great to have her wand back, but she was still in a hospital bed with crushed legs and a foot hanging on only by the skill of the healer who reattached it.

“Very pretty. Most people can barely generate a mist.”

“I can’t afford to be like most people.” Susan said before she could stop herself.

“Why is that dear?” Her caregiver tilted her head and gave her a sideways glance.

“Because, I can’t let Harry down. He’s counting on me to be able to hold my own. Whether it’s dementors, death eaters or effing stone gargoyles.” Susan answered with a hint of frustration.

“Not setting the bar too high are you?” The mediwitch asked sarcastically.

“Making fun of your patients is not a good bedside manner.” Susan changed to a glare.

“Just trying to get you through the anger phase. I can’t work on your legs right now, so I might as well work on your head. Face the truth, Susan. You are always going to be a distraction to him. It’s part of being in a relationship. Spouses, children, family and friends are all part of life, but they can be the biggest distractions in every sense of the word. From what the intern downstairs was saying, your

engagement to Wizarding Britain's most eligible under twenty is a bit forced. If you are going to force him to accept you, then make damn sure that it is you that you are forcing on him. Trying to get him to accept a stranger and you are both going to struggle accepting this woman you intend to be for him. Do you want him to want you or some Witch out of the legends?"

Feeling small Susan answered, "Me."

"Good. Then we won't have to find a parking spot for Babba Yaga's hut anytime soon. Skinny chicken legs always give me the woolies." Both women laughed at the mental image of the legendary Russian Crone's animated hut standing on its chicken legs next to the hospital. Being Muggleborn, Colleen thought it was the ultimate in magical Recreational Vehicles when she did a report on it back in her Hogwarts's days.

"What if I don't know who the real me is yet?"

"Then you are just like the rest of us, deary. Merlin, I'm still trying to figure out how my life got so messed up."

"Thanks for cheering me up."

"Anytime. Now, I am going back downstairs. If you need anything tap that touchstone with your wand and I'll come back up. Read some magazines, I think you and your young man are featured in that one. Cast a few spells, but don't blow anything up please. The custodial staff isn't aware of this floor. So, I'd have to fix it and believe me – I am much better at fixing people than furniture."

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Against the backdrop of the screams of the injured and the dying, Voldemort began to trade curses with Albus Dumbledore. In previous battles they would talk and taunt each other. Tonight there was no need for such foreplay.

*"Contrico Tonare!"* An azure bolt of raw magical energy burst from his yew wand.

*“Contego Veneficus!”* Dumbledore’s mage shield scattered the blast of crackling energy. Wordlessly, his enemy returned an *Attrero Glacies*. The same spell from the far east that he had used to kill an acromantula moments ago. Obviously the ancient relic did his share of world traveling as well. Far better to dodge than waste time and energy by erecting a fire shield.

He felt one of the ice shards ricochet off of his unicorn hide vest as he rolled underneath the barrage. He responded with the killing curse. A dismissive wave of Dumbledore’s wand banished a rock into its path, stopping the curse and pulverizing the rock.

*“Pedestrian Tom. I had hoped for better from you. Invito Volatillis Leo!”* The dispersing cloud of dust allowed his enemy the time to complete a complex gesture as Dumbledore transfigured a tree stump into a winged lion. As the lion took to the air, Dumbledore dodged his return fire and cast a mirror image spell so that it looked like two winged lions were speeding towards him.

Voldemort had to admit the geriatric fossil was a crafty wizard. At the distance and rate of speed, he would have to concentrate to discern which was the illusion and which was the actual creature. Dumbledore wasn’t about to allow him that moment to concentrate on unraveling the subterfuge. He cast his fire whip above him. Even conjured and transfigured animals feared fire. The illusion would not. As he anticipated, one of the creatures balked and roared in pain as the whip scorched its skin and severed one of its wings. The monster dropped to the ground proving that even injured magical felines land on their feet. The killing curse eliminated the threat posed by the creature completely.

*“Corpus Inflatus!”* Bellowed the Chief Warlock and the dead creature’s body exploded in a spray of gore. Voldemort vanished as much as he could, but some of the bone fragments ripped at his exposed flesh and tore holes in his cloak like birdshot from a muggle shotgun. He staggered backwards from the blast.

Amazed that the ‘leader of the light’ would actually use a bit of Necro magic against him, Voldemort suppressed a smile. The lion was never meant injure him, only to get close enough. Dumbledore must

know that in a battle of raw power, the advantage goes to him. He was using guile and cunning instead. Ironically, this was the battle the Dark Lord had expected out of Alastor Moody back on Azkaban. It was time to remind the great Albus Dumbledore just who is Slytherin's heir. He would need to get closer to his prey.

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Harry descended the steps from the Ravenclaw girl's dormitories. He had Ginny's promise of silence and cooperation. The Ravenclaw common room had a less 'cozy' atmosphere than the Gryffindor common room. In his own house it was not uncommon to find students chatting or listening to a wireless set. This place on the other hand seemed like some kind of extension of the library or a mausoleum. Either way, Harry didn't like it.

He walked up to Hermione and Ron and sat down on the elegant, but slightly uncomfortable couch. "Did you and Ginny straighten things out? Do I need to go up there?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, we straightened things out. We're good. She's going to help me with a project. Don't give me that look, you are already checking over everything I want to show the DA this year. So is this everything you always wanted in a common room?" Harry smiled at his friends and changed the subject. He had to let them know that Ginny was doing something for him. There would be more questions otherwise. Hermione had her feet resting comfortable in Ron's lap while reading a book. Ron was holding a dueling magazine just above his girlfriend's toes. She smiled at Harry and kicked Ron's magazine playfully, interrupting his reading.

"Would you be surprised if I said it looks a bit too bookish and cold?"

"Really?"

"That's what I said too mate. I guess five years with us has finally corrupted her. Are you staying tonight? If not, you better get a move on. They seal the door in about fifteen minutes and don't open it until morning." Ron said raising his magazine a bit higher and shooting Hermione a dirty look. Harry was chuckling at the irony of Hermione breaking Ron's concentration. It was good to see two friends enjoying

themselves. He got the distinct impression that this was their form of flirting with each other. It made him feel less dirty, less tainted. Hermione smiled sweetly at Ron and kicked his magazine again.

"I'll bunk here tonight." Harry said as Ron tickled Hermione's feet causing her to squeal. She pulled her legs back to her.

"Shouldn't, ah Ron quit! Shouldn't you firecall Susan. She'll be worried." Hermione said while kicking at Ron's hand. Ron responded by making a big show of opening his dueling magazine again.

"She's at St. Mungos." Harry said as quietly as he could. Ron closed his magazine.

"Harry! What happened? Is she okay?"

"She's fine. I just got back from seeing her. They still need to do some work on her, but they have to wait for a day or two. Did you hear about what happened at Gringotts this morning?"

"Yes it was on the wireless. Don't tell me she was there?"

"Yeah she was banged up pretty good."

Hannah and Chelsea came over immediately at the mention of Susan being injured. Harry gave what details he could remember. Rather than reveal the spell she used to destroy the gargoyle, he said she had used something her aunt had taught her. The group was suitably impressed that Susan had managed to take out a portion of the bank's first line of defense. Harry asked that they remind her of that next time they see her. After about ten more minutes and repeating the tale once more for Lisa, Kevin, Terry and Mandy, Harry excused himself and headed towards the nearest available dorm room with an empty bed. He noticed as he was leaving that Hermione's feet had again worked themselves back into Ron's lap. Harry's happiness for his friends caused him not to note the calculating look on Hannah's face wondering what her best friend's fiancée was doing spending the last hour up in a dorm room with a girl that had just attempted to slip him a love potion a little over a week ago.



He opened the first room he thought was available and closed it just as fast. Apparently, Angelina was glad to have Fred back! Opening the door had breached the silencing charms and allowed him to understand just how enthusiastic she was. Fortunately, they had not seen him. Harry ended up in the fourth year boy's dormitory. It felt suddenly strange to not have Susan's warm body pressed up against him. He felt a little guilty that he was feeling frustrated while she was laying in a hospital bed. He remembered how Hermione always badgered him about how his frequent visits to the infirmary always unhinged her. He countered by reminding her of his daily visits during her unfortunate petrification. She told him that was her point exactly. It is almost as bad for the person visiting the injured person. He began to clear his mind and allow sleep to claim him. His scar started throbbing. Riddle was up to something.

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Snape was pleased. It was a pity they hadn't been able to convince Potter to violate the wards protection around the school. He set the pensieve memory on the central table. His master would be pleased. Perhaps, it was important enough to interrupt the meeting with the werewolves. He passed Pettigrew as he headed back towards the apparition point. The rat animagus gave him a quick nod of acknowledgement. 'A strange little fanatic,' Severus thought.

For a moment he entertained the notion of how different Pettigrew would have been in a different house. He was a natural born follower, who fell in with the wrong crowd. Potter, Black and Lupin had no idea what to do with a minion. If they had there would have been no betrayal, idiots.

At the apparition point he closed his eyes and concentrated on the location of the meeting. He felt a resistance to his movement. Something was wrong. Anti-apparition wards were in place at the destination. Severus ran back towards the main chamber. Pettigrew and six others were there.

"All of you grab brooms and follow me, now!"

"What is it Snape?" Pettigrew asked already in motion.

"There are anti-apparition wards up at the meeting site. I know an area we can portkey to that is only a few miles from there."

"Everyone grab this length of rope, I will create a portkey. The meeting point is roughly two miles from there, due north."

"Why not portkey directly there?" One of the younger recruits asked. Severus remembered that he was an idiot when he was a student and apparently the intervening years had not helped.

"Listen idiot. I don't have time for this. We portkey in there and either we are appearing in the middle of a trap or we surprise our master. Our master doesn't like surprises. If you live long enough you'll learn it. One final thing Sullivan, this isn't school anymore. You fuck up and I will personally kill you." Snape said casting the portkey spell and enjoying the young man's flinch.

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To an outside observer the area around the burning wreckage of the barn was chaos. No werewolves remained alive. Less than five arcomantulas remained as they scuttled amongst the bodies stopping to feed on the dead. They gave a wide berth to the two dragons and the giant struggling. The great Aragog was no more. The agreements their lord had with the two-legged ones were now void. They headed into the woods, each of the spider children began would take their time getting back to the nest. When all of them arrived, they would fight until only one remained. That one would become the new spider-king.

Hagrid stepped over the remains of Walden McNair. It is one thing to believe you can wield an axe, when your victim is some chained up animal that some corrupt government official insisted on destroying, but it is another thing entirely to fight someone else who knows how to use an axe themselves. The death eater's weapon was too bulky for the smaller man to use effectively. Hagrid was stronger, faster and using a lighter weapon. The end was a foregone conclusion to Hagrid, who had fought hand to hand against full-blooded giants. He didn't even stop to enjoy the look of horrified shock on McNair's dying face as he split the death eater's head open like a ripe melon.

With no enemies immediately in range Ruebeus Hagrid looked towards his brother Grawp. The giant was limping towards the woods, dragging his club and clutching at his side. Hagrid was glad he had prepared three large poultices for his brother back in the cave. He looked for a way to assist Norbert, but the young Ridgeback was engaged in deadly combat against Tom's abomination. The rear wing of the necrodragon was completely ripped off and the other one was bent at an odd angle. It had scorch marks all over from Norbert's flaming breath.

Some of the flames must have spilled over onto Aragog. Hagrid felt a tightness in his chest as his eyes made out the burning corpse of one of his oldest friends. Norbert was a bit worse for wear as the two monsters continued to snap and claw at each other. As the dead welsh green snapped it's maw forward, Norbert reared back and unleashed a gout of dragonfire directly into the others face. Coming out of the fiery maelstrom, it looked like one of the eyes had been melted in the socket. Instinctively, Norbert began circling to the blind side of the Necrodragon. The smaller Ridgeback made its move and was able to charge past the creatures defenses and lock it's jowls around the neck. The ground shook as the two beasts became locked in a death embrace. Hagrid moved clear as they rolled towards him. When the pair came to rest Norbert raised his head in a roar of primal victory as the neck and attached head had separated from Tom's creature. In a display of pure animal savagery, the injured Norbert tore at the body of the fallen creature, as if the living dragon wanted to destroy every last piece of the magical aberration.

Smiling a broad grin, Rubeus Hagrid turned to look at the other battle still in progress. Not liking what he saw, Hagrid sprinted towards the battle. He prayed to gods, both human and giant that he was not too late.

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Dumbledore's fluid wand work again caused Voldemort problems, as the ground he was standing on transformed into quicksand. He was barely able to cast a spell to leap out of the muck, before his enemies freezing charm turned the quicksand into ice. 'Clever transfiguration from a seasoned master.'

*"Calx Manus Frendo!"* Dumbledore tapped his left arm with his wand and reached out to grab him. Voldemort saw a ripple effect cross the ground between them and a hand created of earth clawed at him. He shielded his wand arm with his other, only to have it caught firmly in the grasp and feeling a vice like squeeze on his forearm, bruising it instantly. Using his wand he sent a blasting spell into the base of the arm reaching out of the ground. The arm disintegrated, and Dumbledore shook his arm vigorously like he had been stung. It allowed Voldemort to retake the offensive.

*"Lanitus Contagio!"* 'No children's spells tonight,' thought the Dark Lord as he sent a dark cutting curse at Dumbledore. His enemy grunted as some of the curse penetrated the protective shield. The wound would carry an infection with it.

*"Abrumpo per Incendia!"* Dumbledore's firewhip lashed out at him ripping gouts of charred earth into the air. Making use of his superior mobility Voldemort countered with *"Telum Glacies"* sending a large jagged chunk of ice, who wandlessly banished it to keep his firewhip in play. The tongue of fire licked at his shoulder ripping a gouge in his vest and searing at the flesh beneath. Voldemort let a hiss of pain escape his lips as the two of them continued to close on each other.

Either Dumbledore was trying to flaunt his power, or he was getting desperate. Performing wandless and wand magic at the same time was incredibly taxing even for the most powerful of magic users. As Dumbledore rounded with the firewhip again, Voldemort counted on Dumbledore's desperation and channeled his raw anger into his next spell. *"Praesentia Fluctus"* A wave of raw energy raced towards Dumbledore, who released his whip, but failed to erect a proper shield in time. The power of the spell sent his nemesis tumbling through the air.

As Voldemort suspected, the geezer was tiring. Now, to press his advantage. His crushing hex slammed into Dumbledore's shield. His dark cutter broke through the barrier marking Dumbledore for the second time. He swatted away the feeble counter attack with a dueler's shield and sent another wave of power crashing into 'the only one he ever feared'. Albus's wand tumbled from his hand as he flew through the air again. Voldemort watched as his enemy attempted to

wandlessly summon his wand back to his hand, but with a wave of yew it froze in mid air, where it would remain for the next five minutes.

*"Crucio! There, Albus try fleeing now. Acidus Lampas!"* The headmaster screamed and rolled to the side trying to avoid the spray of acid. The cursed phoenix appeared, but a killing curse cause it to retreat away from Dumbledore for the moment. 'Your pet won't save you this time!' He thought triumphantly.

Gasping and clutching at the right side of his face, Dumbledore raised his hand to create a feeble wandless shield. *"Lanitus Contagio!"* This time the cutter tore through the shield and severed the arm halfway between the elbow and the shoulder.

"No more games, Albus this ends now. *Avada Kedarrgh!*" Voldemort yelled in pain as Hagrid plowed into him at a full run sending him tumbling to the ground. The half-giant must weigh thirty stone. Voldemort barely dodged the axe as it slashed down. Voldemort tried to point his wand at his one time scapegoat only to have it swatted out of his hand.

"Time to die Tommy!" Hagrid roared swinging the blood spattered axe at Voldemort's head.

With no wand, Voldemort lost the advantage. His wandless banisher barely sent Hagrid back two meters and he was already on his feet again. Voldemort tried to summon his own wand only to have Hagrid's meaty paw snatch it out of the air and toss it into the woods beyond his ability to summon. Unlike the last time, there was nothing to stave off death, if this halfbred fool were to kill him it would be final.

"Not today, Riddle! My turn for payback! If I don't get you my dragon will be here any second." His wandless cutter got rid of the axe head, but it was draining him. To add to the frustration Dumbledore's firebird just reappeared. 'No, I cannot allow him to escape! I'm too close. He must die tonight!' Too late as the phoenix whisked his prey to safety. Hagrid clubbed him with the broken axe handle. Voldemort drove his fist into the giants gut and concentrated on his banisher to augment it as his other hand drew the unicorn horn knife and slashed at the halfbreed stomach. The cut had no noticeable effect, but the

magical punch merely elicited a grunt. Hagrid's return blow cracked three ribs.

"Got yourself a tiny little knife there dontcha, little wizard? Didn't they used to beat you in your little orphanage?" Hagrid's kick felt like a sledgehammer to the knee as Voldemort felt his left leg give out from under him. Gathering his anger, he banished the knife directly into Hagrid's chest. It buried itself up to the hilt as Hagrid screamed in pain and staggered forward. It was a fatal blow, but from the maniacal expression on Hagrid's face, Voldemort could tell that he didn't care.

He climbed to his feet as Hagrid stumbled for him. "I'm already dead, Tommy, but I'm taking you with me!" Hagrid laughed coughing blood. He raised his arm Dumbledore had previously injured to block the blow and felt it shatter as he was knocked back to the ground. Voldemort rolled away as Hagrid stumbled towards him. It would be a humiliating way to die. He had to stay of the giant's reach long enough for the wound to finish off Hagrid. Weakly, he banished the crazed halfbreed in front of him. It had no effect.

"*Crucio!*" He heard a voice cry out as Hagrid sank to the ground in pain, but still trying to struggle forward towards Voldemort. Outlined in the twilight was Peter, pouring his energy into the torture curse. The dark lord used this to further separate him from his would be killer.

Peter then cast ropes to bind Hagrid, who roared in frustration. Voldemort recognized the same frustration at having Dumbledore escape his clutches.

"Your wand Peter." Voldemort commanded kneeling on his one good leg and letting his damaged arm dangle. Peter stepped in a wide arc around the trussed half-giant and pressed his wand into his master's hands. He also felt the wards preventing his escape fall as several death eaters began firing curses from their brooms into the forest.

"Your timing is impeccable, Peter. Now, Rubeus it appears the advantage is mine again. Shall I leave you to bleed out here or finish you."

"Doesn't really matter ter me, Tommy," wheezed Hagrid. "Your day is coming soon."

“Not even your precious Dumbledore can stand against me anymore. This was his best effort and he failed. The ‘Leader of the Light’ has been vanquished! I am the most powerful wizard in the world.”

“Great man that Dumbledore, great wizard. Too bad it ain’t him you gotta worry about. One day Harry’s gonna come fer you. Great man that Harry Potter. Better than you’ll ever be. Start looking over your shoulder Tommy.”

“What do you know? Tell me. *Legilimens!*” Hagrid averted his eyes and raised himself to his knees. Only then did he look back at Voldemort. As fast as Voldemort began to invade his victims mind he retreated as Hagrid drove himself into the ground forcing the knife further in. The first rule of Legilimency is to never be in someone’s mind when they die. He barely made it out in time. The mental backlash caused him to drop to the ground.

“Master! Severus and the others have finished the dragon and driven those in the woods away. What are your orders?”

“*Accio wand!* Thank you for the loan and your assistance, Peter.” Voldemort said as he caught the wand coming to him from the woods and returned Peter’s wand to him. It was a twitchy feeling wand. ‘Strange wand for a strange little man.’ He applied enough healing magic to allow him to temporarily stand on his injured leg. “Peter hand me that. I’ll make a portkey back to our headquarters. I need to heal. Bring the old man’s severed arm and wand. I’ll mount it by the fireplace. The only one I ever feared, indeed! Carve my knife out of Hagrid and burn his body. He died like his kinsmen and he deserves to be cremated by their traditions. See if my dragon can be salvaged, but do not linger too long. Dumbledore’s helpers will no doubt send the Ministry.” He would never admit it to Peter or anyone else for that matter, but Hagrid’s final words disturbed him. Had he vanquished one enemy only to learn that another has already taken his place? It was unsettling. Still, his enemies had thrown everything they possibly could at him and yet he was victorious!

“As you command, Master.” Peter said bowing before handing the broken axe handle to his master.

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## Chapter 22 – Of Death, Remembrance and Dark Magic

Harry stood at the open door to the infirmary. Professor Vector had come to the room he was using for the night and brought him here far too early. The new Head of Slytherin had explained that there was a battle last night and that Dumbledore was badly injured and Hagrid was dead.

It made him feel numb to know that the first magical person he had ever known was gone. He still remembered the man's colossal frame bursting through that door and taking him from the Dursleys. It had been a particularly effective memory to use in his third year training against the boggart-dementor. Before then, Harry had many dreams that someone would come and rescue him from his horrible relatives, but never in his wildest dreams would he have envisioned a huge man wielding a pink umbrella, who smelled of whiskey and body odor. Another friend lost to this damn war! Looking at the shattered body of Albus Dumbledore, it appeared that the Keeper of the Keys hadn't been the only one to suffer from the latest Dumbledore decision.

He had what looked like a muggle oxygen mask on his face. There was a small reservoir of liquid in a basin that was being slowly evaporated into steam. Fawkes sat perched next to the bed. The firebird leaned over the basin and let a tear fall from its eyes. The misting water rose from the basin and into the mask. Fawkes then returned to trilling a gentle song for its master. Dumbledore had bandages covering what was left of his right arm. His long beard was mostly gone, looking as if it had melted in some spots. The skin on the right side of his face was horribly burnt and a patch covered his right eye. Prior to entering, Harry had been suppressing his urge to throttle the headmaster, but looking at the damaged creature in front of him left him devoid of anger. Although, Harry's bitter resentment remained.

Madame Pomfrey stood looking even worse than Harry remembered from last night at St. Mungo's. She eyed him saying, "It is against my better judgment that I am letting you in here right now, but he insists on seeing you. I am going to put a privacy dome around the two of you, so that your talking does not wake Mr. Lupin. The headmaster is having difficulties breathing. Do not aggravate his condition! I



understand the two of you are not on the best of terms, but you will conduct yourself like a proper gentleman in my ward, or you may very well end up here as a patient. Do we have an understanding, Mr. Potter?" The nurse could be rather intimidating.

"I will conduct myself accordingly," Harry answered.

Harry sat in the chair next to Fawkes while the nurse erected a privacy dome. She nodded at the headmaster and tapped her wand to a bracelet on his left arm and a matching bracelet on hers. "Albus, I will feel your heartbeat and sense your breathing through the bracelet. Mr. Potter has been warned to be on his best behavior. You will be on your best behavior as well. If you do not mind your breathing or if I sense any distress on your part, I will remove Mr. Potter from the ward and whatever business the two of you have will wait until I say so. Is that clear?" A solemn nod from the headmaster was her answer, as she stepped outside the privacy dome.

Dumbledore pulled the mask away from his face. His voice was raspy and his breathing labored. "When someone tells you to experience everything in life, I recommend skipping the part where you try to breath acid. I am sure you have questions." He said replacing the mask and taking a series of breaths.

"Why? What did you hope to accomplish by fighting him? You knew you weren't going to win." Harry said making a conscious effort to control his anger.

"Sometimes even though the battle cannot be won, it must still be fought. I have a letter in my office from Hagrid for you. His injuries in France were more severe than most were allowed to know." Dumbledore paused to take another two breaths before continuing. "When protecting Madame Maxine from a manticores, he was stung by its tail. His mother's blood flowing through him prevented him from dying there, but the same blood prevented any of the cures. He had at most six weeks left to live."

Harry allowed himself to sink back into the chair as he tried to process that information. He remembered the birthday party and Hagrid's arm wrapped in bandages as the half-giant causally dismissed his injury. Only now did the subtle messages, like the look

in Hagrid's eye when he said that Madame Maxine was recovering in France, the gift of the powerful amulet hanging around Harry's neck right now, the admission that he wouldn't be teaching this year, and the crushing embrace he had given Harry before going leaving. The clues had been there, but Harry had missed them all! Hagrid knew he was going to die soon! Harry cursed himself for missing the signs!

Dumbledore motioned to Fawkes and the familiar disappeared. "Fawkes will return with your letter and a vial to hold my memory of the battle. My faithful friend is feeling guilty for being unable to save me sooner. Foolishly, I underestimated Tom's renewed power and our battle became a one sided affair. We had a limited window to attack his werewolf allies. It is the reason I insisted on the prisoner exchange last night, because I knew exactly where he would be. It was a golden opportunity to reduce his powerbase."

"You should have told the Minister and brought more troops. You should have brought me!" Harry hissed.

"You were needed here for the prisoner exchange. As for the Ministry, there are too many security leaks. Myself, Hagrid, Remus and one other were the only ones who knew of this plan up until I told three more teachers whose assistance I ..." Albus coughed a few times and took several more breaths from his mask before finishing, "... required to perform the wards. Look at the memory Harry and when you do ask yourself if you are ready to face him? You are not, but I will do my best to make you ready. I will need to recover first, but I think I have bought our side time."

Clutching the armrests, Harry fought against his own anger. He wasn't really sure where his anger should be directed. Instead the two of them sat there until Fawkes returned with a letter in its beak, a small vial in one of its claws and an arrow with black feathers in the other claw. Dumbledore looked at the arrow and shook his head sadly from side to side.

"What?" Harry asked while taking the envelope from Fawkes.

"Bane's answer. Look out the window and tell me what you see?"

Harry stood and looked out into the expanse of the forbidden forest. Several plumes of smoke could be seen rising from the area near where the colony of Acromantulas lived. "I see smoke and lots of it. It looks like part of the forest is on fire."

"Perhaps it is best that Rubeus did not live to learn of my betrayal. His friend Aragog was also dying and chose to die in battle rather than in prolonged agony. It was only the control he had over his ilk and his friendship with Rubeus that prevented an attack against the castle or Hogsmeade."

The pieces of the puzzle began to fit together in Harry's mind. "You told the centaurs. Bane was the other one you told."

"Yes, I let Bane know that Aragog and many of his adult children would be dead at the conclusion of our battle. The centaurs are using this opportunity to wipe out the colony to the best of their abilities."

"Hagrid didn't know? You really are a master of manipulation!" Harry was stunned at Dumbledore's duplicity. The frail, battered man before him seemed to wither even more.

It was a full minute before Dumbledore responded. The injured wizard looked as if he was summoning energy he did not have for a long reply. "Yes. I will have to live with the shame of betraying allies, but if the colony attacked Hogsmeade the death toll would have been too high. You have accused me of sheltering you to try and protect you. To some extent that is true, but not for the reasons you might have thought. If you truly are to become a leader, you will have to make decisions like this all the time in a war. People look to me and see the twinkle in my eyes, well, one eye now. They see the person on the chocolate frog card and not the blood on my hands. I will have much to atone for in the afterlife, but I will face it knowing that I did what I felt was right and the consequences be damned!" Dumbledore lapsed into a coughing spasm and Harry had to press the mask to his face. Dumbledore calmed after a moment and gestured to Harry's wand. The nurse had come out of her office and was glaring at Harry.

Harry watched as Dumbledore used the borrowed wand to withdraw the memory and helped him place it into the vial. "Harry, I need to

rest. Take your letter and mourn our dear friend, Hagrid, and the others lost to us. We will speak again, when I am better.”

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Harry went to the Room of Requirement to read the letter from Hagrid. Sensing his need, the room provided a bench in the middle of a meadow on a sunlit day.

*Dear Harry,*

*I never was much good at these things, so I'll try and be brief. Had to use one of those self-correcting quills with a vocabulary charm on it. I tried writing one without it and it wasn't pretty. Could have used one of these back when I was in school. I'd like to thank you for many things, Harry. You believed in me when they dragged me off to that prison. When I first started teaching, you, Ron and Hermione would ask lots of questions in class to help me through the lessons. I can't say thanks enough. The three of you came down for visits and even stood up for me after that reporter woman revealed my past.*

*Whatever happened, you can rest assured that I went down fighting. I was already in a bit of pain and it wasn't going to do anything but get worse. Olympe had the best healers in France look me over and the Headmaster was beside himself when I broke the news to him. Blames himself for sending me on that mission. I told him that he didn't put a manticore there. He had Poppy look me over just to confirm things, but in the end nothing short of what used to be in Vault 713 could have saved me.*

*I'll have that axe you made for me tonight. It's already claimed Greyback's worthless life and Remus said after you two talked that if the axe was made by your hand, it should be able to kill old Tom Riddle. That's another thing I have to thank you for. He's just Tom Riddle. The same rotten bastard that turned me and Aragog in and got himself a pretty little award, when it was really him all along. He took away my chance at being a real wizard, so tonight is payback time. I'm not afraid of him anymore because I'm already dead. My body just doesn't know it yet. You've been standing up to him since you were one and tonight I won't be afraid of him or anything else.*

*With some luck, I took him with me. If I didn't, then I know you'll finish him soon enough.*

*You're a great wizard Harry Potter. Never forget that for a minute.*

*Your  
Rubeus*

*Friend,  
Hagrid*

By the time Harry finished the letter. The sunlit day was overcast and the room had started to drizzle. Harry put the letter into the folds of his robes to protect it from the splatters of rain that joined with the hot tears rolling down his cheek. After sitting in the rain for thirty minutes Harry stood and the rain stopped. He wanted something to destroy and he watched the room provide him something suitable. The meadow shifted. A white Volvo station with the Grunnings logo appeared in a driveway as the rest of #4 Privet Drive materialized in all its meticulously maintained glory.

Harry started in the backyard with the hedges with severing charms and incendiary curses. The stone birdbath no neighbor ever looked at, but Vernon always made him scour with the small wire brush wasn't there. Instead it was the same fountain that was in the atrium at the ministry. It was a symbol of prejudice against lesser creatures – just like they would have thought about Hagrid. Harry savagely destroyed the fountain and banished the pieces into the detached garage with a loud crash as Harry began hurling more powerful curses at the garage he painted most every summer even though it didn't require. Harry then turned his attention to Vernon's precious company car. Bludgeoning hexes pummeled the metal. Harry was momentarily impressed with the room's attention to detail as the airbags on the car triggered. For the first time he tried the banisher nicknamed the 'Hammer of God'. The station wagon was hurled end over end into the street like some movie special effect. The same flaming curse he injured Voldemort with in Susan's house crashed into the exposed undercarriage and it detonated.

With the preliminaries out of the way, Harry looked upon the house. He didn't really want to say that he was raised there, it felt more like he was kenneled there. He blew the front door off its hinges and sent the remnants of the door into his Aunt's china hutch shattering the

'oh-so precious' grandmother Dursley's hideous pattern. Harry stopped at the little angels on the mantle that represented his never born cousins. He made the room get rid of them. The door to his cupboard and the second bedroom received special attention riddled with piercing curses and conjured arrows before he blasted them into oblivion.

Harry spent the next ten minutes moving from room to room destroying furniture, pictures, vases, mirrors and anything else that caught his eyes. When there was nothing but debris left he went back to the front yard. Focusing on his anger, he began throwing the most powerful curses in his arsenal at the house. Bludgeoning curses hit like boulders from a medieval catapult. Gouts of fire charred set the debris inside ablaze. The blasting curses blew holes through one side of the house and out the other. Finally, the house collapsed upon itself.

Spent, Harry sank to the ground. He looked at the destruction wrought by his spells. The neighborhood now resembled a war zone. Several other homes were now burning and damaged. It was impressive to see how much devastation his magic could cause, with even the stray curses. He checked the time. It was eight fifteen in the morning. Harry realized he should grab some breakfast and go see Susan.

Stepping out into the hallway, Harry realized that he might have taken his anger a bit too far. Flitwick and McGonagall, as well as several other teachers were there with their wands drawn. Several house elves were cleaning up dust and debris. Some of the statues had fallen in the corridor. The inhabitants of the portraits were nowhere to be seen. One could almost feel the residue of magic in the area.

"Mr. Potter! We thought the castle was under attack! The outer wards actually started weakening." McGonagall exclaimed.

"I am sorry Professor. I just learned about Hagrid and went looking for a place to be angry. I didn't realize that I might be damaging the castle from inside the room."

Professor McGonagall looked ready to continue her dressing down, but Flitwick stopped her. "No harm done Mr. Potter – at least none

that I can tell at the moment. Ever since Professor Vector and I learned of this marvelous room, we have been trying to understand how it functions. I believe that it started drawing power from the wards to protect itself. Truly magnificent! Minerva, why don't the rest of you go back down to the Ravenclaw tower and reassure the students. Albus will also probably want to know what happened. I'll stay here with Mr. Potter until the house elves have finished cleaning the mess up."

"Very well, Filius. I trust you will show more restraint in the future, Mr. Potter." The head of Gryffindor said before turning around and leaving with the rest of the teachers.

Harry shuffled his feet annoyed with himself. They watched the house elves reattach a statue's arm and continue scourging the dust. "Rather impressive tantrum you just had there, Mr. Potter. May I see your wand?" Harry handed him the wand without thinking about it and watched the charms professor cast a variant of the *priori incantatem* on the wand. It was the same one that aurors used to determine spells cast by the wand. Harry cringed as the last dozen spells appeared. Flitwick looked at them impassively raising a bushy eyebrow occasionally, before smiling broadly at Harry.

"A word of advice Harry, never hand your wand to someone else just because they ask for it, even me. The staff is going to be instructed to never ask for your wand again. Anyone who has a problem with it can take it up with myself, or the headmaster. I am impressed by your spell selection. Some of those spells aren't even in the books in the restricted section. I think I can skip the first few things I intended to show you. You're farther along than I thought. I assume you have the books from which you have picked up some combat magic?"

"Yes." Harry offered a simple answer not wishing to divulge any secrets. He was pleased by Flitwick's praise.

"Bring them and together you and I will evaluate what spells best suit your dueling style. Be back at this spot at noon and be prepared to duel."

"I have the pensieve memory of the Headmaster's fight," Harry said.

“Bring it, your other memories of him and your pensieve. Both of us need to know his current strength. I don’t know if the room would or could create a pensieve, but I would also rather not take a chance that the fabricated construct would disappear taking the memories with it. The headmaster has agreed to bring on an assistant charms professor to handle the first through fourth years. This will leave me with a rather large block of open time. Your dueling instruction will be the focus of this time. Until school starts plan on spending at least four hours a day with me.” Flitwick seemed almost as eager as Harry now.

“I understand sir. Thank you. Who is the new instructor?” Harry asked out of curiosity.

“Andromeda Tonks. She was one of my most capable students. It also doesn’t hurt to have another friendly wand around the castle.”

“Technically, she is also a relative of mine.” Harry said, thinking with the tiniest bit of humor that Mrs. Tonks must also have great expertise at handling ‘difficult’ children.

“One of the main reasons the headmaster readily agreed.”

“Sir, I intend to go visit Susan again at St. Mungo’s. I need to be leaving shortly.”

“Harry, go see Professor Sprout. She will escort you there. I know that you dislike this escorting business, but just like we were saying a second ago, it never hurts to have an extra friendly wand around. You are a high priority target in this war. Like it or not you require protection.”

“I don’t like it, but I can see your point,” Harry replied with a hint of resignation heading off.

Harry began to feel a bit better as he walked towards the Great Hall, but was stopped yet again. ‘At this rate, I am going to be late seeing Susan!’ “What can I do for you this morning, Hannah?” He looked at the blonde Hufflepuff witch in front of him.



"I don't like you spending a whole bunch of time with Ginny Weasley, especially while Susan is recovering in the hospital. I don't pick up much from you anymore, but you look guilty." Hannah had her hands on her hips and glared at him with her penetrating stare.

"Don't go looking for trouble, Hannah. Keep out of this." Harry's anger returned in full force. It came out fairly threatening.

"I don't like threats, Harry. Tell me what you are doing with her."

"No. It doesn't concern you. It doesn't concern anyone but me and Ginny."

"I'm making it my business! You don't think Susan will hear about this? I don't know what you are doing with her, but I know what it will look like and it is going to hurt Susan. She puts up a tough front, but I will not stand for you playing games with her!"

"And just what does it look like, Abbott?" Harry asked coldly.

"It looks like you're thinking with your dick!"

Harry's already frayed emotions were now past their breaking point. "Listen up! Ginny is helping me with something. It is not any of your business or anyone else's. What kind of games do you think I am playing? People are dying out there. There's a damn war going on! Maybe a dumb bitch like you hasn't figured it out yet, but I just found out I have to bury another one of my friends this morning! Do you think I like waking up in the morning to find out who's dead today? Do you?" Harry found himself right in Hannah's face and the cringing witch was dealing with both him and his naked raw anger spilling over his Occulmency shields. "I will tell you one time and one time only. Keep! Your! Fucking! Nose! Out! Of! This!" Harry watched Hannah slide down the wall and begin to shake uncontrollably.

Harry didn't even bother looking back as he continued. Lisa Turpin and Hermione were standing in the hallway gaping open mouthed at the exchange. Lisa stepped around him giving him a wide berth and a slightly fearful expression and headed over to help Hannah. In the small part of his mind that actually gave a damn about Hannah's feelings, Harry realized that her empathic gift would in all likelihood

make the elder Abbott sister worthless in a real fight. The rest of Harry's mind couldn't really care less at the moment. Hermione followed Harry into the Great Hall.

Hermione waited a minute before asking politely, "Do you want to talk, Harry?"

"Not really. I just want something to eat and then I have to find Professor Sprout." He said grabbing a muffin and an apple. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

"I don't really think she would like to see you threatening one of her prefects. I am curious what you and Ginny are up to as well, but I trust you and I sense it's important. It is hurting you to keep secrets, but I know you'll tell me when you are ready." Hermione met his gaze and put her arm on his shoulder.

The two of them looked at each other. Harry couldn't think of any way to say it without being blunt. "Hagrid was killed last night."

"No! How?" Hermione looked stricken.

"He and Dumbledore led an ambush against Voldemort and a bunch of werewolves. Dumbledore is badly injured."

"How bad?"

"Missing an arm bad. Breathing through a mask bad. Possibly blinded in an eye bad." Harry answered.

Harry had to put an arm on her to steady her. She buried herself in his chest and sobbed, "Calm down Hermione. We'll get through this."

Harry did his best to comfort her. He thought about showing her the letter, but opted against it. There was a not-so veiled reference to the prophecy in it. Even in Hermione's distraught state, Harry doubted that his friend would miss the clue.

He helped her sit down and stayed with her a couple of more minutes. When Ron came into the hall, Harry quickly updated him before heading over to Professor Sprout. Ron took it stone faced. His best

male friend was a contrast. He would express anger instantly, but hold on to sadness indefinitely. For three full days after his father had been attacked Harry had watched his friend's tight expressions. On the second night Harry was certain he had heard Ron crying into his pillow. Neither of them ever mentioned it.

Ten minutes later, Harry and Pomona Sprout were headed back to the infirmary and flooing directly to St. Mungo's. Harry paused and looked at the resting figure of Dumbledore before stepping into the flames. The man had once radiated power, but now he looked broken.

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Inside the pensieve, Voldemort watched the image of Harry Potter circle around Dumbledore's desk anxiously. A couple of portraits, with the main instigator being Phineas Nigellus made several snide remarks to the distraught boy. Finally, he settled into the seat looking defeated. Thirty seconds later, Dumbledore arrived via the floo in his office. Voldemort still felt his injuries from the battle with Dumbledore two nights ago. The few injuries inflicted by the "One Armed Leader of the Light" had been easily healed. The broken ribs and the resulting punctured lung had lingering effects. The lung was functional now, but his breathing was ragged. The ribs were healing, but the soreness was a constant reminder of just how close he had been to complete defeat. An illusionary glamour covered the fact that he will be walking with a limp for the next few weeks. After he was treated, he obliviated Georgina Crabbe's memories. That removed any clues to his condition.

"Sirius?" The boy asked hopefully. The headmaster sighed and shook his head.

"I have contacted the head of the Department of Mysteries, but the Veil remains beyond even their understanding. I fear he is lost to us."

"He tricked me into coming there," Harry muttered sobbing into his hands.

"Much of your blame should be directed at myself, Harry. I suspected your connection to Tom and it required that I maintain a certain distance between the two of us. I wished for him to see that we did

not have a relationship beyond student and teacher. I have made mistakes in keeping information from you. I will correct this now. You asked me once to explain why Tom has specifically targeted you. At the time I declined to answer that question to keep you unaware of the burden fate has bestowed upon you. In light of tonight's events, I will reveal the prophecy to you."

"You can't! It was destroyed." Harry muttered.

"The item in the Department of Mysteries was merely a record of that prophecy. I was the witness who provided the record to the ministry."

"Tell me," Harry said looking up from his hands with a look of anger on his face.

Voldemort and Snape observed Dumbledore taking the Potter brat over to the pensieve in the corner of the office. The headmaster stirred the pensieve and both saw watched the ethereal form of the Divination instructor appear.

*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal... The light shall falter but withstand... Protected in the year of fours the Chosen One flourishes and the Dark Lord fails... The final reckoning shall come and magic's true champion is selected as the Chosen One's seventeenth year dies... The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...*

"She's a fraud!" Harry exclaimed.

Dumbledore shook his head. "You know all too well the prophecy she gave concerning Peter's escape. I assure you that she does have the talent. A spy for Tom was listening at the door and heard the first two lines and relayed them to his master. Of all the magical children born in July, there were two candidates – yourself and Mr. Longbottom."

"Do you mean it might not be me?"

"Unfortunately, no. Tom chose you and marked you. As for the rest, I had originally thought the year of fours referred to your survival at the

end of the Triwizard Tournament, but I now believe it is actually referring to the leap years. In 1992, the Basilisk was unleashed on the school. Not only did you defeat the creature, but amazingly enough, the school escaped any fatalities. Tonight in 1996, you survived yet another encounter with him and many of his inner circle are in custody. I suspect that any further encounters for the remainder of this year will be more favorable towards our side. It ultimately alludes to a final battle in the summer after your seventh year."

The memory of Harry did not seem too pleased. In fact he started slowly and quickly worked himself into a screaming frenzy. "You knew all along. Sirius died for nothing! Mr. Weasley almost died for nothing! You should have told me years ago! Damn you! So all I am is a weapon to you!"

The Dark Lord watched as Harry began smashing delicate, and in some cases irreplaceable pieces of magical equipment. This continued for five minutes before Dumbledore stopped him and sent him to Gryffindor tower.

Exiting the pensieve, Voldemort summoned Severus to his central chamber.

"What do you think, Master?" Severus said. He was proud to have finally accomplished his mission of delivering the prophecy to his master. Snape highly doubted his master would share the wording of the prophecy anytime soon.

"It is vague and defines no clear winner." Voldemort continued the conversation in his thoughts. 'I was also at a loss to explain the ease with which the great serpent was dispatched in the boy's second year and this year has not exactly been a year of unprecedented success for the cause. Still, I have my lingering doubts. While I ponder Dumbledore's interpretation, I will tread cautiously. I suspect they will begin training the boy in earnest, in anticipation of a final battle in his seventh year. They may believe that they have time. I may need to strike before then.' Returning to the Death Eater in front of him, he said, "Antonin will be returning in two days time to be reunited with his daughter. He is bringing with him more supporters. They will be green,

but they will replenish our ranks. I am also considering several initiatives, including one from the young Frenchwoman who served as my eyes at Gringott's. A pity I did not view her memory sooner, else I would have learned that the Bones girl had been at St. Mungo's. My spies in the Ministry report that she has been moved to Hogwart's already. Ms. Beaucourt has a theory on how it may be possible to launch an attack against the Order's Headquarters. Would you like to hear it?"

Snape arched an eyebrow and smiled at his master. "Of course, Milord. Nothing could make me happier."

Lord Voldemort shifted imperceptibly to a less painful position in his chair at the command table and began to explain the plan. For a moment he allowed a smile to cross his thin mostly colorless lips. 'The Dark Lord Voldemort – Magic's True Champion'. The phrase had a rather pleasing sound to it.

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Rufus Scrimgeour sat at his desk. The latest reports on Death Eater activities, budget expenditure requests and a half eaten tuna on wheat sandwich were strewn about his desk along with Citations for Heroism for Bell, Jordan and Weasley. He hurriedly signed his name to the Citations and gave them to Jennings to be sent to the memorial service. Arthur Weasley had been called to the office, where the Minister personally expressed his condolences. Rufus had always thought the man to be a bit of a loon with his muggle obsessions, but respected his dedication to the job. The man's eyes lacked a certain spark that was usually present. It was understandable. In a few short weeks he had lost two of his sons and his family was seen as some of Dumbledore's staunchest supporters. Out of respect for the wishes of the Weasley family, Rufus was sending the citations and a prepared statement to the ceremony. Scrimgeour had offered to make a speech, but Arthur asked in the name of his family and the others that the service be about the lives of those lost and not the war looming ahead.

Returning to the tuna sandwich, he looked at the recent reports of fighting. The aurors and the auror auxiliary force had engaged Death

Eaters or their supporters three times in the past week. Casualties were light on both sides and the outcome was inconclusive. This seemed to be a shift in the pattern. It made him wonder who was now commanding the attacks. At first fighting them to a draw could be seen as a victory and he had pounced on the good news.

Rufus then realized that success could be a double-edged sword, as his calls to institute a full-scale draft were now meeting significant resistance. Too late he concluded that the recent spate of battles were in fact just a series of meaningless feints to weaken his mobilization argument. His counterpart in the Death Eater's forces was now changing tactics, with the real battle being fought on the floor of the Wizengamot. Some of the mobilization opponents cited the massive cost, others the human cost of a large and unprepared force trying to fight a smaller and more mobile force, and still others made passionate arguments to allow the auror auxiliary force a chance to prove themselves. The destruction of the werewolves and the spider colony could not have come at a worse time for his administration, politically. His initial response had been to downplay the story, but the people were desperate for any nugget of good news.

Naturally, the role of the centaurs had been changed to 'forces aligned with the Ministry'. Of course, the acromantulas being dark creatures were obviously there courting the Dark Lord's favor. The truth would require too many explanations to the public. The truth also gave Rufus a renewed respect for the venerable headmaster. After years of Fudge's half-truths, he had begun to believe that Dumbledore was slipping. That clearly was not true. It was tempting to release a few details of Dumbledore's injuries, but keeping him sequestered until he is more 'presentable' was probably best. The reaction of the general public would be too hard to gauge. On one hand, it could generate the necessary panic to force his draft proposal through, but on the other hand, it could create 'panic in the streets'.

He gave a cursory glance over the speech to be broadcast over the Wireless this evening. He made several notes in the margin of the parchment about losing some of the highbrow vocabulary. Apparently the speechwriter was forgetting his directives. Rufus didn't want to sound like a smooth and refined politician. That was Fudge's method.

He wanted to sound more in touch with the everyday wizard and witch. At the top of the speech he wrote more detailed instructions.

*Mr. Sinnelli,*

*Fix this now! The speech needs to sound more conversational and less like a politician stumping for votes. This makes the second time I have had to tell you to CUT THE FLOWERY LANGUAGE SHIT OUT! There will not be a third time.*

RS

As his winged envelope left his desk, two others arrived. The first was more meaningless bureaucratic drivel. The second was from Lawton in Muggle relations. The Prime Minister of the Muggles has requested an update. It was at times like this, he wished he stayed an auror.

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The Black Flags hung over the Great Hall once again, reminding everyone of Cedric Diggory's death. Unlike before each of the houses were represented on the flags. No current Slytherin students had been reported dead over the summer, but Blaise Zabini and possibly several others was widely rumored to be 'guests' of the Dark Lord along with Marcia Compton as hostages against their prominent families.

Susan sat in the second row of chairs with Harry at her side. He did not want to speak in front of these people, but could not refuse Arthur's request. He told Susan that he owed it to Lee, Katie, Tony Goldstein, hell, even that pompous git Smith! Susan's hand brushed up against his as she calmed him. The cane she was using to help her walk almost slipped and clattered to the floor. Harry caught it just in time. She shot him an embarrassed smile of thanks.

The tension between Harry and the Abbott sisters was tangible. Susan had caught on to it immediately. It put her into an uncomfortable position between overprotective best friend and secretive fiancée. Honestly, Susan did not approve of Harry spending several hours alone with Ginny 'The Leech' Weasley. She had asked Harry for an explanation. He had asked her for five more days and



then he would explain what he was doing and the need for secrecy to her. That was four days ago. Grudgingly, she accepted this. Hannah on the other hand, was livid and could barely stand to be in the room with Harry. Chelsea was very protective of her emotional older sibling and had made some very nasty comments over the last four days to both Harry and Ginny, both of whom put up an emotionless mask to the insults. Susan finally had to drag both Hannah and Chelsea into one of the rooms and tell them to back off of Harry. She could care less about Ginny. Neither of her dear friends looked very happy. Hannah directly said that she thought Harry is cheating on her.

Harry and Susan were staying in Ravenclaw with the rest of the students while Susan healed. The two of them had been given the first year boy's dorm, so Susan would not have to stress her healing foot and ankle that much. Terry Boot and Kevin Turpin gave it up without being asked. Susan made sure to thank them. Surprisingly enough, the headmaster overruled McGonagall and allowed Harry and Susan to continue to cohabitate. Harry said that without this arrangement, he would have taken Susan back to #12. It didn't stop the whistles and knowing looks as he helped her get to the dorm room. 'Like anything is going to happen right now anyway!' Susan thought sarcastically. Harry was treating her like a broken china doll. It was upsetting, but her healer and Madame Pomfrey had both warned her against over exertion and both she and Harry agreed that their 'exertions' might be a bit too much for a week. They still shared the same bed and sought safety and comfort in each other's arms, though she was initially a bit frosty towards him the first night when he came back from four hours alone with 'The Leech'.

She had accompanied Harry into the Room of Requirement each day to watch him practice with Professor Flitwick. Harry had said the first few days they spent looking at memories of both his and Voldemort's fights and noting their strengths. Susan asked and had been allowed to see the battle between Dumbledore and Voldemort. It was a level of magic she had only ever dreamed of. She was miserable for the rest of the day, claiming her foot was bothering her, when inside she was horrified that Harry would have to face that monster in battle. Hearing the headmaster describe the killing curse as 'pedestrian', made Susan worry about what kind of spells those two wizards had in their arsenals. All her intended had was five years of questionable

schooling, a handful of auror training manuals and a couple of books that were probably on the Ministry's banned list.

Flitwick continued to be fascinated by Harry's corporeal patronus. The day before Susan was allowed to leave St. Mungo's, Harry had performed it for the entire teaching staff and several ministry officials down in the Great Hall. The Arithmancers used their detection equipment on it and set to the long and arduous task of determining how to extract the magical equation that would allow other magical folk to perform this feat. Harry didn't have to say anything, but she knew he hated the spotlight. Just like now after Elise Bell had finished a heart-rending story about her daughter Katie and the things she found joyful in her all too short life. Harry was making his way to the podium.

All the members of the Weasley, Bell and Jordan families had spoken. Susan had allowed her loathing of Ginny to be put aside while the young girl barely made it through her speech and had to be helped off the stage by her father. Fred had made a couple of strained jokes about his twin, but he was obviously hurting.

"I was asked by Professor Dumbledore, who cannot be with us today to speak today not only on the behalf of Lee, Katie and Fred, but primarily in the name of Rubeus Hagrid. Some would say that he was a half-giant, but I say he was a giant among men. Early in his career here, he was expelled for a crime he did not commit. The sad truth is the thing that perpetrated that crime went on to become the one we fight. Still he made his way in this life becoming the gamekeeper here for a long tenure and finally becoming the professor for Care of Magical Creatures. When my parents were killed, it was Hagrid that took me away from that ruined house and when it came time for me to rejoin the magical world it was Hagrid who came for me again. He bought my owl as a birthday present for me. He tried to get me to eat those awful rock cakes. He put me on a hippogriff and told me to fly. I have so many stories about a man who was like an uncle to me, yet I also realize that I do not have enough and will not get any more. He was already dying when he went into battle as I later discovered. I will read a passage from his last letter to me."

Harry paused before continuing. "That's another thing I have to thank you for. He's just Tom Riddle. The same rotten bastard that turned me and Aragog in and got himself a pretty little award, when it was really him all along. He took away my chance at being a real wizard, so tonight is payback time. I'm not afraid of him anymore because I'm already dead. My body just doesn't know it yet. You've been standing up to him since you were one and tonight I won't be afraid of him or anything else"

"In the end Rubeus Hagrid stood face to face with this so-called Dark Lord and with little more than two years of schooling, an axe and almost beat him. That is heroism. I saw the same heroism from Katie, when I watched her in Angelina's memories. She was scared, but in her eyes I saw determination and courage. He offered her a chance to join his twisted cause and she refused him and everything he stood for. That is heroism. When that grotesque perversion of humanity, tried to kidnap Fred, Lee Jordan and George Weasley went for their wands without hesitation. Their only concern was Fred's welfare. That is heroism. I salute their heroism and say a prayer in their names and the names of the other classmates lost this summer – Anthony Goldstein and Zacharias Smith. I hope for a day when the world doesn't require it's heroes to make such a sacrifice, but that day isn't coming anytime soon. I would add to all those stories you have heard already, but I will leave that to others for I find myself empty inside."

Susan watched through her own tears as Harry started walking back to his seat next to her. Tears rolled down his face freely and he made no move to wipe them away. Professor McGonagall stopped him on her way up to the podium and the two briefly exchanged words that made both smile slightly.

When Harry sat back down she put her arm around him and squeezed him tightly. He steadied himself and gave Susan a smile. She watched him look over to his other friends and meet their gaze. Susan watched the exchange and she couldn't help but notice his eyes locked on Ginny's. He nodded at her and mouthed something. She nodded back and Susan could see the anger through the tears.

Harry turned to Susan, "I'm going to need your help tonight." From the sound of things, Susan was about to get her answers.

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After the ceremony Ginny spent a little time with her family, but then begged off to spend some time alone. She needed to get away. She headed to one of her favorite spots to sit and think. It was a window with a view across the lake. She pulled a chair over in front of the window. She sat there and shed tears for her brother, Luna, Lee and Katie. The last few days had been the worst of her life. She never thought it could be worse than her second year, but it was. Her 'project' with Harry had almost broken her. Her nightmares were back in full force. As she drifted off to sleep leaning against the window the only happy thought in her head was 'at least my debt to Harry Potter has been paid in full'. She had her 'freedom'. The cost would haunt her for months to come.

"Wake up Weasley." A hand shook her. The sun had set. Ginny groggily came to. She checked her watch. It was almost eight-thirty. She was late. Wiping the sleep out of her eyes, she looked at the owner of the hands that were shaking her. 'Great it's the Abbott sisters.'

"I don't have time for this! I'm late. Let me go!" She made to leave, but all four hands were now restraining her.

"Yes, late for another rendezvous with our friend's fiancée. It's time for some answers you little slut. Make it easy on yourself and tell us or don't. Either way I am going to find out." Chelsea said.

"Leave me alone! I'll scream!"

"Privacy dome, scream all you want. What, Puffs can't be cunning and prepared? Looks like we're doing this the hard way. Hannah body bind her."

Ginny struggled to get to her wand. It was missing, already removed before they woke her. Seconds later she was frozen into a full body bind. They propped her back up against the wall. The reality of what they were about to do hit her.

"You should have just told us, bint. *Legilimens!*"

Chelsea plowed into Ginny's mind. With Ginny's magic trying to fight the body bind, it was even easier to get into the Gryffindor's mind. She had no defenses and Chelsea's promise to the headmaster to never use her skills during school didn't count because technically school wasn't in session. She burrowed through embarrassing images searching for specific images of Harry Potter. The girl was fighting, but she was losing quickly. There! She locked onto the memory. Harry was standing in Ginny's dorm room.

"Fine what's your plan, Harry?" Harry handed her a book from the folds of his robe – Possession: Nine Tenths of My Law.

"I found this book in my library. I was looking for a way to prevent Voldemort, oh for Merlin's sake it's just a name! I was looking for a way to prevent him from trying to possess me again. When I was reading it, I discovered that it is relatively easy to possess someone that owes you a life debt."

"What! Why would you want to possess me?" Chelsea was certain her own expression of horror matched Ginny's in her memory.

"Not you. Pettigrew. I'm going to control him, get close enough to Riddle and kill him."

"What do you need me for?"

"This is going to sound sick, but I need to practice on someone. If you voluntarily help me, I can do it several times to get the feel of how to properly do it. Once I get the hang of it, I'll have you resist me. I get one shot at an involuntary possession. It will dissolve the life debt, so I have to make sure I can do it correctly."

"You don't know what you're asking Harry. I don't know if I can do this."

"I do know what I am asking. I've got a chance to end this once and for all. I have to try. The only other people that owe me life-debts are Susan and your father. Maybe Bill, but he and I haven't discussed it yet really. Your father would go to Dumbledore and I am marrying Susan. I need your help, simple as that. I don't want any more friends to die. Please help me?"

“Can you really kill him, Harry? It’s one thing when you are in a fight. Are you sure you can walk up to him and kill him in cold blood?” Ginny asked looking up from the hands covering her eyes.

“I will kill him. I’ll stick Peter’s wand in his back and blow a quaffle-sized hole right through him. Kill him and the war ends. His lackeys will scatter like cockroaches. If the ministry catches Snape, I’m going to ask Scrimgeour to let me execute him. I can probably get the same deal for you if they get their hands on Lucius Malfoy. Merlin knows he deserves it! If you want money too, I’ll arrange it. Say the word and I’ll open a vault in your name and put whatever you want in there. Help me end this war Ginny, please.”

“I’ll do it, Harry. I don’t want any money. I’ll do it for Luna. I’m ready to give my oath.”

Chelsea was suddenly thrown violently out of Ginny’s mind. She was shocked at what they had been doing, it was probably the darkest magic she had ever heard of.

“Hannah, we’ve got to find the headmaster. He needs to know what Potter is doing!”

Ginny broke out of the body bind and started screaming in pain. “Aahhh! It hurts! Make it stop!”

“What wrong with her?” Hannah asked. Their plan was going awry. They had intended to get the information and obliviate her and go to Susan with their suspicions confirmed. Whatever was going on certainly wasn’t part of the plan.

“She swore an oath to Harry. We made her break the oath. Her own magic is torturing her.”

“Stun her! We’ll take her to the infirmary. It’ll give us a way to talk to Professor Dumbledore.”

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Susan exclaimed, “You’ve been doing what!”

"I know it sounds bad, but I've got to try. Dumbledore and Hagrid hurt him. He might still be weak. Pettigrew owes me a debt and I intend to collect. Dumbledore would probably want me to wait and hope that the rat would throw himself in front of a killing curse or something. I've got a shot to finish this and there is no way he could suspect this." Harry was drawing a runic circle with chalk that had been immersed in a potion made from Harry's blood, raw fire crab flesh, and Pettigrew's rat hairs retrieved from a cage stored in the attic of the Burrow. Thank Merlin, the Weasleys never seem to throw anything away! Dobby was kind enough to retrieve them for Harry and not ask any questions.

Harry thought back to his possessions of Ginny. It was a powerful euphoria controlling someone. Occulmency was critical to controlling stray thoughts. Harry learned quickly, when Ginny suddenly removed her clothes on the first night. On the second night he started practicing casting spells as Ginny. It was tricky at first, but he learned fast. Soon Ginny's wand was weaving complex spells she had never heard of before. The spells were weaker than when Harry was in his own body. He would have to compensate for that. By all accounts, Pettigrew is magically pathetic. Last night, she fought his control with everything she had and kept on fighting. He was able to control her for twenty minutes before, he was forced out and there was a brief flare of magic that signified her debt to him had been dissolved. Like most nights, he left first so Ginny would have time to have a private cry and compose herself.

He looked up from a copy of the rough floor plan of Riddle's headquarters that had been created from Penny's interrogation. He would have to move quickly through the house. Depending on where Peter was, Harry might try to free the prisoners first and take them to the portkey area, but his number one target was Riddle. He positioned the charmed mirror in the center of the possession circle and fluffed the cushion he was going to be laying on during his time out of his body.

"Is there any way to talk you out of this?"

"No. I don't want to give any more eulogies. I can end this tonight. Support me on this. I know it's asking a lot."

"If that's what it takes to end this war, then do it. When this is over, no more of this Dark Arts business! I mean it. I've watched you cast Unforgivables and now this. I don't want to marry a Dark Wizard, but I do want to marry you."

"Thank you, Susan." Harry said giving her a kiss. He looked over at the Marauder's Map. "It looks like Ginny isn't going to come. She's still sitting by that window. She said she wanted to be here, but the ceremony today must have overwhelmed her. I am going to seal the door. You might want to relax and read something. Stay off your foot, so no pacing. It is going to take about thirty minutes to get into the right meditative state. Don't disturb me until I am back."

"I believe in you. Now go kill that fucker."

"Language Miss Bones."

"Yes, where exactly am I picking up all these expressions lately? Perhaps from my foul-mouthed fiancée?"

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The body of Peter Pettigrew stumbled in the hallway and caught himself reflexively. He was taller than Ginny, but still shorter than his normal body and much heavier. He paused for a moment and examined the silver hand. It felt odd, like wearing three gloves on that hand. It was peculiar.

Harry attempted to figure out where he was. There were steps leading down in front of him. He started down them.

There was a desk and a person sitting at it. He must be at the cell area. The DE at the desk looked surprised and quickly put the magazine he was reading away. Harry caught the name of the magazine and recognized it from the 'Ritchie Coote' collection of magical pornography that circulated through the boy's dormitories – Busty Beach Veela.

"Which cells are occupied?"



“Cells ten through twelve have a new batch of pretty little muggle birds in them for entertainment, Mr. Pettigrew. Cells two through five have ‘guests of the Master’ and you should know better than I what that means.” The man was in his early twenties and spoke with an Eastern European accent. ‘Drumstrang, no doubt.’

Harry looked at the row of keys behind him. “I want to speak to the Compton girl.”

“Just speak? You know she has the Master’s protection.”

“Yes.”

“Okay, sir let me unlock the key rack.” The Death Eater tapped the rack with his wand and muttered a spell.

“*Stupefy!*” Harry said stunning the guard and dragged his body over to empty an empty cell. He paused a second and took a deep breath. “*Diffindo!*” The cutting charm opened the unconscious man’s throat and blood began to pour out. Harry felt nauseous, but if he could kill somenameless Death Eater in cold blood he could easily kill their master. He shut the cell door behind him.

He looked in each of the four cells containing a ‘guest’. Blaise Zabini looked up at him from a Runes book the boy was reading. Marcia Compton looked like she was asleep. He didn’t recognize the witch in cell four and much to his surprise looking a bit worse for wear in cell five was Viktor Krum. Harry had heard that he was recovering in seclusion from an injury. Originally, Harry was going to give the Death Eater’s wand to Marcia, but there was a reason Viktor was a Triwizard champion.

He opened the cell door. “Viktor?”

“I still have no intention of joining you, vermin.” Viktor replied.

“Do you want to get out of here?”

“What game is this?”

Harry had a lie prepared. “Polyjuice and the game is called jailbreak.”

“Who are you?”

Harry had no intention of telling either Compton or Zabini his identity, but this was different. “You once asked me what my intentions towards Hermione Granger were. Right after that Barty Crouch Senior came stumbling through the bushes.”

“Harry Potter! How is this possible?” Viktor’s eyes were wide with surprise.

“Magic, pretty useful stuff – if you ask me. Are we going to play twenty questions or are we going to do a jailbreak?”

“Jailbreak.”

“Here’s a wand and the keys to the other cells. There’s a bunch of muggles in the last few cells and a dead guard in the first cell. Once we round up everyone, it’s up the stairs, past the first junction and left at the second junction. The designated portkey and apparition point is there. Take a portkey to Hogsmeade and contact Hogwarts. Got it?” Viktor nodded.

Harry helped Viktor open the cells. The muggles would definitely have to be obliterated. Viktor kept a silencing charm over them. Harry led the way and Viktor followed at the rear. Harry handed Viktor the girly magazines. When Viktor looked at him strangely, “Turn them into Portkeys and get out of here?” Viktor quickly made a portkey and had Compton take three of the muggle girls with her. Zabini took the other two girls and the older witch with him.

“We should go now, Harry.”

“You go, Viktor. I have a second mission.”

“Then I will come to.”

“I look like his right hand man. I’m going to kill him. You’d be a dead giveaway. Go! Neither Zabini or Compton have a wand. You need to get to them.” There was a crack of an apparition and both Harry and Viktor fired stunners and dropped the Death Eater in his tracks. “Take him with you. They might be able to get some information from him.”

“Good luck, Harry. Strike him down.” Viktor said offering his hand. Harry took it and watched the quidditch star and his prisoner disappear.

Harry returned to the corridor. He saw Lucius Malfoy sneer at him and start down the hallway towards the prison cells. ‘Damn! More delays!’ Harry said turning back towards the prison cells.

“Following me Rat?”

“No, Malfoy.” Lucius started down the steps. Harry waited until he got to the bottom and stunned him.

The silver hand was remarkably strong as he dragged Lucius into second cell. Harry used the *lacero* charm to completely sever the man’s head. ‘Scum like him doesn’t deserve to bleed to death. Sorry, I can’t save him for you Gin.’ Just like that, Harry had executed his second person in cold blood. He found he didn’t mind it one bit. In the mind he could begin to feel Peter struggling with him trying to wrest control. He needed to hurry. Quickly he started back up the stairs. He needed to get to the central chamber and locate Riddle.

Rounding the corner, he stepped into the chamber. He was in luck. Riddle was over at one of the bookshelves looking at some tomes.

“Good evening, Peter. I trust all is well.”

Harry bowed his head and answered trying to make his voice sound meek, “Yes, Master.”

“Very good. I was looking for some reading material before I retire for the evening,” Riddle said turning back to the bookshelves. The silver hand and wand emerged from the folds of Pettigrew’s robes. The irony of the Tommy getting killed by the silver hand he had made was delicious. Harry chose his curse – the blasting curse *Tonare*. It was simple, powerful and effective. It should make good on his promise to Ginny of a quaffle-sized hole in Riddle. Harry leveled his wand at the back of the man responsible for so much pain and agony in his life. Only two meters separated them. He could feel Peter clawing away desperately trying to throw him out of this wretched body. ‘Too late Wormtail, your master dies now!’

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Voldemort tilted his head studying the books on the shelf as he still tried to hide his ragged breathing. Sleep would be nice, but the pain from his ribs was keeping him awake. He would try reading for a while to tire his weary body out. If it didn't work, he would then try meditation. Too many pain potions made him lightheaded. He needed a boring topic.

'Perfect! Better Living Through Magical Herbs! As boring a subject as there ever was. Though, it would be easier to just ask Peter to kill me now?' He thought sarcastically.

As if in response, Voldemort heard Peter's voice behind him and felt the swirl of magical energy, "*Tonare!*"

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## Chapter 23 – Debts Paid in Full

“Madame Pomfrey! We need your help!” The hysterically shrill voice of Hannah Abbott shouted as the doors to the infirmary opened. She had run ahead while her sister floated Ginny behind her.

“What is it?”

“It’s Ginny Weasley. She’s uh, she’s having some kind of seizure. Chelsea will be here in a second. We’ve had to stun her twice. She keeps coming around and is thrashing!”

Madame Pomfrey brushed by the hysterical girl and walked briskly into the passageway. The younger Abbott was having difficulties with the thrashing and floating girl. Bits of wild magic were scorching the corridor walls. It looked all too familiar.

“*Immobulus!*” She waved her wand and Molly’s youngest ceased her flailing. Poppy’s restraining spells were exceeded in strength only by Filius and Albus. It was one of the few things that Minerva was actually jealous about. She conjured a stretcher and had the girl float Ginny Weasley onto it before securing her to the stretcher. A conjured stretcher can be floated much faster than a person’s body. Poppy didn’t expect the Hufflepuff girl to know this. She idly wondered how many people would be in her basic first aid class this year with the war heating up. The seventh year elective was usually only attended by those attempting to be healers or similar fields. Last year’s class had only six students willing to forgo the extra study time for their NEWT exams.

“House Elf!” she said in a firm commanding voice. One appeared instantly. “Go to Molly Weasley and inform her that her daughter is in the infirmary.”

“Yes, Miss Nurse.” The house elf disappeared as quickly as it arrived.

“Madame Pomfrey, I need to go clean myself up.” Chelsea Abbott said gesturing to her robes damaged by the wild magic emissions coming from Ginny Weasley.

“Very well, come back as soon as you can.” Poppy had a good idea what was going on as she watched the girl scamper off. If the Abbott girl came back with her parents as well, it would only confirm it. She would get her parents and try to give them ‘her side of the story’. In twenty-two years, she had seen students do some very horrible things to each other. Magic was a very dangerous thing to hand a child. There was a reason that the early years did not get taught certain spells. Too many stunners could stop a weak person’s heart! If they had listened to her recommendation that awful Bellatrix Black girl would have been thrown out for her use of the slug vomiting hex. The dehydration caused by it almost killed two students that had been bound and exposed to it for an hour before Professor Slughorn had stumbled on to it, but no they allowed that little evil girl to continue her studies and evolve into the monster she became.

She set the stretcher down on the bed Remus Lupin had vacated this morning. She then vanished the restraints and the stretcher.

“What is it Poppy?” The still raspy voice of Albus Dumbledore queried from his bed as he stood still wrapped in bandages.

“Too soon to say, but my early diagnosis is she broke a magical oath. The corridor outside has all the telltale signs.”

“Miss Abbott? Would you care to enlighten us?” The headmaster asked solemnly.

“We just found her like this! I don’t know what happened.” Hannah was a pathetic liar. She knew it. Her parents knew it. Hell, every member of Hufflepuff and most Ravenclaws knew it.

Dumbledore sighed. She would deny it at least two or three more times before cracking. Such is always the way with teenagers. Perhaps he could speed this along a bit. “How is her condition Poppy? Miss Weasley is a powerful witch for her age. The damage from her oath violation may be quite severe.”

“I am still checking. There’s a good deal of damage being done. She’s stunned for now, but I don’t think she should be stunned any more. In her condition, her heart might give out.” It wasn’t quite wholly

the truth – at least not yet, but Poppy knew exactly what Dumbledore was doing. It wasn't the first time they had used this tactic.

"As you can see, it is imperative that we know all the details immediately. Any delay in her treatment could cause lasting damage. You must tell me now." His bandages and still healing scars served only to make him look even more intimidating.

Pomfrey picked up right on her cue. "Headmaster, please! I know you want to get to the bottom of this, but browbeating her serves no purpose. The most important thing is Miss Weasley's welfare. Miss Abbott, we are trying to help. You can tell us. Anything you can tell us will be greatly appreciated."

It had the expected result as the duo played the young Hufflepuff like a violin. "We didn't mean it! We made her tell us what she and Harry have been doing in the Room of Requirement. She swore an oath to Harry that she wouldn't tell." Another layer of the proverbial onion had been removed. They were one step closer to the truth.

Dumbledore's brow furrowed. "And what exactly was she doing with Mr. Potter in the Room of Requirement?"

Hannah realized she was in trouble now. She didn't actually know what they were doing. Chelsea hadn't told her yet. She had only felt the shock of horror coming from her sister before the waves of agony started rolling off Ginny Weasley. "I don't know, sir. She told Chelsea."

"I see. Where is your sister at the moment?"

"Albus, I sent her to clean herself up. Her garments were damaged by Miss Weasley's magical discharges."

Dumbledore paused for a minute, watching Poppy perform more diagnostics as he sought the correct way to ask the next question. "How is it your sister managed to convince her into breaking a magical oath?"

"I don't know sir." Hannah protested weakly looking at the floor.

“Did either you or your sister employ legilimency on her?”

“No! No. It’s not what you think.” Ironical because that was exactly what Dumbledore was certain had happened.

“Albus, you need to stop with this line of questioning. Miss Abbott, we’re only looking for the truth here.”

Hannah was spared from answering as Molly Weasley burst into the infirmary like a woman on a mission. “What is going on? Where is my daughter?”

“She’s showing signs of violating a magical oath.”

“She swore an oath! Who did she swear it to? Get them here to release her right now!”

Albus interjected so that Poppy could return to trying to stabilize her patient. “According to Miss Abbott, your daughter swore an oath to Harry Potter. Miss Abbott, where is Mr. Potter?”

“I think he is in the Room of Requirement. He’s usually there.”

“Why is he there? What is he doing? Why did he make poor Ginny swear an oath? Tell me this instant!” Molly Weasley advanced on Hannah in full interrogation mode. The young witch sank down onto a neighboring bed and began to sob uncontrollably making it nearly impossible to make out her denials in between her tears. Molly was frustrated torn between wanting to force feed truth serum to the girl and wanting to hug her.

“Step away from my daughter, Molly. You know about her condition. If anything it is Mr. Potter that we need to speak to right now.” Peter Abbott’s voice boomed from the entrance. He entered the ward with his youngest in tow. “Chelsea just told me that Mr. Potter has been practicing Dark Magic on your daughter.”

“What!” Every other adult in the room shouted at once, even Poppy was floored by the accusation. She did note how quickly the girl returned with her parent though.



“That is outrageous. He would never...”

“What’s going on here? Albus, you shouldn’t be out of bed!” McGonagall said entering the room.

“Go ahead Chelsea, tell them.”

“He was using her to learn how to possess someone. He wanted to possess someone named Pettigrew and try and kill You-Know-Who!”

The room erupted into chaos for a second time. Several other adults had arrived, including Peter Abbott’s wife in a hastily donned robe, there were even a few curious teenagers lurking at the doorway. Minerva took charge and ushered everyone out of the room that did not belong. Remus Lupin was dispatched to retrieve Harry Potter from the Room of Requirement. It still took a minute to restore order.

“Possession is a very difficult magic, Miss Abbott. It is not easily mastered. Are you certain of your information.” Dumbledore said.

“He told her that if someone owed you a debt it was very easy.”

Dumbledore’s eyes opened wide. He was by no means an expert on that branch of magic, but there was speculation that a debt could facilitate possession. It was not something that the youngest Abbott would know. “And Miss Weasley admitted this to you?”

“She was upset and told us!”

“Your sister said that you found her like this. I do not believe your story. You used legilmency on her did you not?” The room went into an uproar for the second time. Mr. Abbott began stammering about Hannah’s condition as Hannah fumbled with her mind shield with hands that were already shaking.

“We were practicing. She wanted to learn occulmency, so I was trying to show her the basics. It came up while I was giving her a probe. I think Potter wanted her to learn it to protect his dirty secret.” Chelsea realized that she was in a deep hole right now, but she opted to keep pushing this towards Potter’s use of Dark Magic while trying to weave her cover story. She might still get a shot at obviating Leech, or

whatever was happening to her might serve to traumatize her enough that she won't recall the circumstances. 'We should have obliviated her in the hallway before coming down here,' she thought to herself. She often called her sister 'Hysterical Hannah' and it looked like once again it fell to her to perform damage control for the both of them. Some things never change. Her loyalty to her older sister had been the only thing that kept her out of Slytherin.

"I was unaware of Miss Weasley's participation in that particular study group. Molly did you approve of this?"

"I most certainly did not give Ginny permission to learn that! How could Harry do this?"

"I believe we will have the answer when Remus returns with Mr. Potter. We should head to my office and allow Poppy to attend to her patient. Perhaps young Hannah should remain here to recover her composure."

Poppy nodded realizing that the good cop and bad cop routine was now being adjusted to divide and conquer. "Yes all of you out. Molly, please go into the waiting area. Until Mr. Potter is brought here, nothing can be done but make her comfortable and your anxiety isn't doing Miss Abbott any good. There dear sit back and relax for a few minutes. I'll get you a nice calming draught."

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"*Tonare!*" Harry screamed using Peter's voice. The silver hand holding the wand jerked slightly to the right and the spell was off by a meter, blasting a hole through the bookshelf and into the wall damaging some tomes and outright disintegrating others. He could still feel that Peter was locked away and that he was still in control. "*Tonare!*" Harry tried again at the diving form of Voldemort, who had dodged down and to his left while drawing his wand. This time the hand jerked up and the curse flew into the wall above the intended target's head. Harry tried to switch the wand into his left hand, but the silver appendage would not release the wand.

"So, Peter executing a corporate takeover are you? Too bad you didn't realize that I would never give you something that could hurt

me. Your remarkable limb can't curse me. Now, it is time to die. *Avada Kedavra!*"

Both men standing in the room were shocked when there was no green light coming from the yew wand. Harry moved back a couple of paces. He was about to start decoupling himself from Peter, when Riddle tried again. Still no light! Harry returned fire with another blasting curse directed at the floor in front of his enemy. The arm let him fire that one. Pieces of stone from the floor blew from the floor. Some of them hit Voldemort, but didn't cause any real damage.

"*Telum Glacis!*" Voldemort tried the ice spear a hint of desperation in his voice. The spell refused to form. The answer hit him like a lorry – he actually owed Peter a life debt for saving him from Hagrid. It was the only explanation. He was unable to cast any lethal spells. It was going to be a remarkably strange duel between the two as he began to wrack his brain for non-lethal spells. Something smashed into his backside driving him to the ground.

"*Accio Bookshelf!*" Harry realized that the charm on the hand prevented direct spells. He would have to use his cunning. For some reason Riddle's spells were failing as well. Pointing the wand at the books and the shattered bookshelf, he incanted "*Incendio! Invito Vinum!*" The first sent a jet of fire onto the pile of wood and paper that Riddle was struggling under. The second spell, Harry actually had Ollivander to thank. It was the same spell the wand crafter used to shoot a jet of wine during the Weighing of the Wands. The conjured alcohol wouldn't need to last as it caused the fire to burn more intensely.

Harry began weighing his options. No one would be coming, except by accident. They had learned from Penny that the Central Chamber had permanent silencing charms on it. A thought occurred to him, 'Fire Always Makes It Better' and he continued shooting jets of fire at anything that would burn. With enough smoke, maybe that would get both him and Peter. He could decouple while as Peter struggled to remain awake.

"Enough!" Voldemort rose from the rubble. He was clutching his side with his non-wand arm. The wounds from the half-giant had been

aggravated. Smoke rolled off his clothing in lazy curls as the fire retardant charms on the clothing strained against the heat. He staggered away from the bonfire and banished the entire fiery mass at the traitorous rat. A wide hole opened in the fireball as a large chunk was vanished. That worried Voldemort. Peter wasn't that strong or creative. Wormtail was also pathetic when it came to vanishing things, yet there he stood magically cleaving an opening through what should have been certain death.

Some of the mass landed at the base of the potions locker. Both men knew what that meant, Voldemort rolled behind the mass of the central table and lost sight of Peter. He chanted a solid concussion shield as the locker exploded.

Harry had seconds to act. He ran towards the wall and concentrated on everything Sturgis Podmore had been telling him about how he triggers his transformation. He had seen Peter's form for years. It was easy to picture in his mind. The change was fast and he scurried towards the hole in the wall making it inside as the explosive blast hit the wall. Some of the fur on his backside was singed from the blast as the wall shook. Harry doubted that the silencing charms could handle that. Riddle would have reinforcements soon, but maybe the blast did some damage. He could still feel Peter clawing away. Maintaining control was becoming like holding a ripped bag of sand together. The transformation further weakened his possession. He couldn't stay in this form for long or Peter would kick him out. The air had a toxic stench, as if a dozen Neville Longbottoms had been on a tear through Snape's lab. The only amusing thing Harry could think of at the moment was that at least the traitorous potion's master would have something to do for a while restocking what was just destroyed. Through his rodent eyes, Harry looked desperately for Pettigrew's wand. It was nowhere to be seen in the rubble that congested the area around the door. He darted out of the mouse hole and returned to human shape savoring the feeling of alteration. If Dumbledore was right about his learning ability, he might be able to use this experience to jumpstart his own animagus transformation. The only weapon he could find was a burning jagged stick of wood. It would have to do. If the bastard was stunned, he'd drive it through his fucking heart like a cheesy vampire movie. A burst of light flashed by him.

Voldemort weathered the explosive shockwave. His barrier wasn't really tested. His strength was again more than equal to the challenge set before him. The next dilemma he face while using a charm to clear the air was how to incapacitate Wormtail. He knew a few basic incapacitation spells, but typically he would use Crucio and then tell one of his minions to bind and bring the victim. This wasn't an option at the moment.

*"Stupefy!"* The spell came out weakly and off target. Peter was running towards him and brandishing a flaming piece of wood like a knife. He rolled to his right and used a wandless banishing spell to send Peter careening towards the opposite wall back by the wreckage. There was something coming through the wreckage, Nagini!

*"Kill the rat, my pet!"* He screamed in Parseltongue.

Still on his hands and knees and shaking off the affects of being tossed into a wall, Harry saw the serpent coming towards him. The silver hand seemed to have no qualms about fighting against the giant snake. Harry could feel Peter's abject terror beneath his control.

It slithered towards him *"Kill rat for Master! Nagini feast tonight!"* Harry could still understand Parsel. Could he still speak it? The monster raised itself up to strike.

*"Stop! I command you!"* Harry hissed at the monster as it came up to him. The snake paused uncertainly. Harry acted. He leapt at the snake and grabbed its neck. He got his human arm around the creature's head. It wouldn't hold for long, but Harry had witnessed Wormtail's silver hand crush a rock. He struck at the top of the head. The snake screamed in rage and managed to gash his human arm with its deadly fangs. It had the same burning sensation Harry remembered from his encounter with the Basilisk. 'Tough luck there, Peter!' He dug his hand in further, gouging the eyes and digging at the head. The pressure continued to build as the thrashing of the snake became uncontrollable. Harry heard a crack and the skull shattered. He ripped flesh and bone away as the snake went suddenly limp.

He dropped the dead snake and looked up at Voldemort's angry visage. He continued in Parseltongue. "You transform like Peter and you have his hand, but you speak Parseltongue. Who are you?"

"It was your idea to begin with, Tom. You tried it on me in the Ministry. I figured turnabout is fair play."

"Potter! Dabbling in possession are we? Your great leader won't be pleased." Voldemort was clearly shocked at this development.

"His approval isn't high on my list right now. Hasn't been for a while. I was more concerned with the end result of killing you."

"Master! Are you in there? Begin removing the debris fools!" Harry recognized Snape's voice.

"Well looks like my time here is up, Riddle. I should leave before your lackeys get here. Sorry about the mess here and elsewhere." Harry said cryptically.

"Severus! Everything is fine. I will clear the wreckage momentarily. There is something more important at the moment. Go check on the prisoners. Take everyone with you." The sounds on the other side of the debris pile disappeared.

"Why did you do that?"

"I'm curious about you, Harry. Any other time, we are trying to kill each other. I can't kill you. You can't kill me. We find ourselves in a most unusual situation and since we are fated to be deadly foes I figured we could talk. You seem quite resourceful. You've destroyed some of Lucius's valuable books and much of Severus's work."

"Snape needs something to do and Malfoy, well let's just say he isn't going to lose his head over a few books."

"Interesting choice of words Mr. Potter, I take it I have one less Death Eater."

"Perhaps more than that, my informant said tonight was a good night to strike." Harry lied, but sowing the seeds of suspicion was about all

he could do. 'It can't hurt, well it might hurt a few of his followers if he goes on a rampage.'

Voldemort hadn't lowered the wand. "We have a few minutes take a seat."

Harry sat down at the table. He could see Snape and the six other Death Eaters headed into the cell block. The table was impressive, much more impressive than the map. Harry could actually feel Peter swell in pride looking at the magical table. Having nothing better to do, he rifled around in Wormtail's memories for anything useful. One thing immediately struck him as important.

*The Headquarters of the Dark Lord's forces is located at #7 Coventry Lane Great Hangleton.*

The irony made Harry laugh. Peter was Voldemort's secret keeper! It wasn't as if Peter had a superb track record in that capacity. In fact he was oh for one. Who was it that said 'Those who do not learn from History are doomed to repeat it?' Harry wondered if Peter realized he had acquired this kernel of information.

"Something amusing, Harry?" Voldemort said noting the look on Peter's face. He tried a probe of legilmency, it produced an unusual effect similar to looking at book in the distance and not quite being able to make out the words.

"This whole scene strikes me as ludicrous. I was wondering if you would offer me a spot of tea or something." Harry lied again and searched for anything else that might be useful. He concentrated on the locations of three 'safehouses' that weren't under the fidelius charm. Those could be given to Scrimgeour. At least this wasn't a complete failure after all.

"I agree. There is a certain irony in that isn't it? So what exactly prompted this rash action on your part?"

"Does the name Luna Lovegood mean anything to you? How about Katie Bell, Lee Jordan and George Weasley? I could go back further, but why bother."

“Indeed, wrath of the righteous. Your willingness to delve into the darkness makes me wonder if you aren’t just set on eliminating me as the competition. The others I make no apologies for, those who draw their wands on me take their lives into their own hands. Perhaps I should say hand? Miss Lovegood’s situation was the result of Lucius’s actions. He was disciplined, but you hinted at a more permanent solution.” Voldemort remarked casually gesturing to the arm mounted over the fireplace. Harry recognized the wand in the hand mounted like a trophy. “How is the girl anyway?”

“Long term spell damage ward – they don’t know if and when she’ll recover.”

“Pity. I’ll be certain to make sure she is cared for once I have taken over. How is your future wife doing? I heard her foot was mangled”

“Like you care? She’s fine. Are we done with the small talk Tom? I think it’s time to go.” Harry said with a hint of rancor in his voice. The poison continued to work through his system. With some luck, Wormtail would die as well. Harry decided to continue acting like the brat Severus had always portrayed him to be and let himself be baited. “How are you doing, by the way? All this activity can’t be good for your recent injuries. Shocking, that you could be so brutally beaten by Hagrid and a few nights later this happens. Your followers might wake up and realize that the Great and Powerful Oz is just a man behind a curtain?”

“You’ve developed a clever wit, Harry, since we last spoke. I am impressed. Were you hoping to cash in on this whole idiotic leap year thing?”

“That’s rich coming from a thing like you with a fixation with the number seven. According to the ghost of Percy, you have an unhealthy numbers obsession. I’m not sold on this prophecy thing, but Dumbledore is. I am more interested in killing you and taking a long vacation. If this ‘year of four thing’ is going to help me bring you down, then so be it. If not, I can wait until the end of my seventh year.” Harry figured he should reinforce the phony prophecy as there was nothing else to be gained at the moment.



"Tough talk, Harry. You sound confident, but you'll never get this close again." Harry continued staring at the map trying to memorize details to compare against the crude map he already had.

"The only reason you're still alive is I put the wand in the wrong hand. Think about that when you try and sleep. You need to watch your back. I have no problem sticking something in it. Are you sure, Severus is really your man? Dumbledore thought so too?"

"Severus is loyal enough."

"Of course he is. He could fool Dumbledore couldn't he? There's no way he could fool you?"

"Impressive double speak and innuendo, Mr. Potter. You might actually have a future in politics, if you had a future that is. Harry, face the fact that you are the Wizarding equivalent of a cockroach. The universe has not allowed me to squash you yet, but your time is coming. Dumbledore and his prophecies won't save you. I've forgotten more in my life than you will ever have a chance to learn. You can train with aurors for decades and still you will fail."

Harry responded by smashing his enchanted fist into the table. He was correct about the magic of the map, as the enchanted map faded in spots. What he still sensed of Peter coiled in anger at the vandalism. He staggered to his feet and leered at Voldemort.

"Do you miss the taste of unicorn blood? You used to rely on it to sustain your feeble spirit. Remember that? What deal with darkness will spare your life this time Tom? The great and mighty Voldemort again reduced to possessing animals to stay alive and you have the gall to call me a cockroach! What old magic are you going to overlook this time? What arrogant mistake will you blame your failures on next time?" Harry started coughing and sprayed some spittle as he felt his energy draining. "Oh dear, I forgot to mention that your dead pet managed to poison the rat. Shame that potion locker was destroyed. So long Tom, I'll see you again soon." Harry said releasing his hold on the dying animagus allowing the body to slump onto the table.

Voldemort saw a flash of magic and knew that whatever debt Peter owed to the boy had been dissolved. He fished in his robes for the

ampoule of anti-venom he always carried with him and forced Peter's frothing mouth open. Turning the servant over he poured the liquid down Peter's throat. "Swallow if you want to live Peter! You need to live, if you are going to have your revenge against the boy."

He watched Peter spasm for several minutes before stopping. There was a faint rising and falling of the man's chest. Pettigrew would live and what debt Voldemort owed him had been repaid. He was once again beholden to no one – a free man. His wand vanished the mound of debris blocking the entranceway. A second wave conjured supports to prevent the ceiling's collapse.

"Milord, the prisoners are gone. Lucius and the guard are dead." Severus said looking with his usual disdain at the scorch marks and rubble where a fully stocked potions locker had once stood.

"Yes I suspected that much. Have one of the others take Peter to the infirmary. What do you think of Miss Beaucourt's plan?"

"It can work."

"Then set it into motion, Severus. The boy needs to die."

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"I do not believe there is any call to punish Hannah or Chelsea in this matter. I will deal with this on a family level." Peter Abbott said forcefully.

Professor McGonagall spoke up, "Does it not strike you as odd that Miss Weasley would suddenly request a private lesson with a young witch, who had been heard calling her and I quote 'A dirty stinking whore' not two days ago? I witnessed the exchange myself and cautioned her. Further, she requests it on the evening of the funeral for one of her brothers."

"My daughter's actions are not in question here. What are we to do about Potter?"

"Not in question? She used legilimency on another person and forced her to break her magical oath!"

“And Potter made her swear that oath. What else might he have been doing with a young girl he could control behind closed doors?”

Dumbledore was glad that both Arthur and Molly were not present at the moment, as it probably would be the genesis of a Weasley-Abbott blood feud. Minerva looked on the verge of declaring one on their behalf.

“That will be enough!” Dumbeldore said causing everyone to stop. “When I helped you locate a suitable instructor for your daughter’s Occulmency and Legilmency tuition, I requested a promise that this not be used here at school. I do not believe that Miss Weasley requested such a lesson. Perhaps if your daughter would be willing to place her memory of Miss Weasley’s request into my pensieve, it would go a long way towards ending this discussion.”

“Chelsea?” Peter looked at his daughter and much to his embarrassment – she shook her head no.

“I see. Perhaps we should discuss a suitable punishment?”

Peter Abbott was a stubbornly loyal man. He joined the Order to protect his family after Amelia’s death. “I will attend to my daughter’s discipline.”

“Under the circumstances, I am not sure that is possible Peter. Depending on Miss Weasley’s condition and whether or not Arthur or Molly press charges, this could actually result in criminal proceedings.”

Peter’s expression hardened momentarily. His wife gasped and Chelsea looked shocked. “I don’t think it needs to go that far Headmaster. Full disclosure of the circumstances that brought all this into being would shine unfavorably on my family, Miss Weasley – for her use of a love potion and most of all Mr. Potter – for his use of highly illegal dark magic. His current status with the Minister can probably weather it, but it would be damaging nonetheless. Beyond that, it would force me to withdraw my support for you and return to a neutral status. I think it is best that we keep this whole series of unfortunate events within these walls. Together we can agree on a suitable punishment for the girls for their inappropriate behavior.”

Albus pondered for a moment, "You play a dangerous game Peter. Going public would almost certainly guarantee a prison sentence for Chelsea and possibly Hannah as well. You are quite fortunate Miss Abbott, the greater good at this juncture is to keep this out of the public eye. You will be allowed to continue your education here and I will convince Arthur and Molly to not press charges. I am partly to blame for this by not requiring an oath on your part to not use your skills on those who had not given their permission. I will require a magically binding oath, if you wish to continue here at Hogwart's. You will also not be allowed to participate in any extracurricular activities without my express approval. Hannah will forfeit her Prefect's badge and be subjected to a similar restriction on her extracurricular activities."

There was a bit of shocked silence after the exchange. Chelsea was subdued. Minerva was a picture of barely controlled rage. It was broken by a small tawny owl flying into the window and landing on Dumbledore's desk. Dumbledore read the note as the owl flew off. "Fawkes, my friend. Go to the Three Broomsticks and bring Mr. Krum and the three people with him here immediately. It appears for better or worse, Mr. Potter is already proceeding with his plan."

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Harry opened his eyes and sat up from the pillows he had been laying on. He had failed in his objective of killing Riddle. Hopefully the rest of it still made it worth the effort.

"Harry! You're back. You need to unseal the door. Mr. Lupin has been out there for fifteen minutes trying to get in! Ginny is in the infirmary. You need to release her from her oath!"

Harry staggered to his feet and released the locking charm on the door. Lupin entered and looked at Harry. "Were you successful?"

"No, not completely. I'll tell you on the way."

"I understand. I'm shocked that it has come to this, but I know you did what you thought needed to be done. Come, we need to get to Ginny Weasley."

“What happened?”

“She broke her oath to the youngest Abbott girl. She’s with Poppy right now, but she has already been injured by the backlash.”

Harry could only shoot Susan a look of exasperation, which she returned. “I told them to back off Harry. I warned them.”

Harry and Remus went ahead, as Susan was still walking with the assistance of a cane. As soon as they walked into the ward Harry said in a loud voice. “I, Harry James Potter do hereby release Ginevra Molly Weasley of her magical oath that she swore to me!” There was a slight flash of magic surrounding Ginny’s bed and her thrashing ceased as she fell back into a restful state. Madame Pomfrey moved from the chair next to Hannah Abbott over to start checking the sleeping Weasley daughter. Lupin asked where Dumbledore was and left to go get him.

Molly Weasley came rushing in from the waiting room. “Harry Potter! You will explain yourself to me at once!”

“How did she break her oath?”

“The say one of those girls used legilimency on her. What on Earth made you decide to involve my daughter in your schemes?”

Harry turned away from the anger of Molly Weasley and focused on Hannah Abbott. “I warned you to leave it alone, Hannah. Susan warned you to leave it alone, but you had to keep digging didn’t you? I’m trying to fight a war and stop a madman and I have to put up with this shit! What do you have to say for yourself, Abbott?”

“Mr. Potter! Calm yourself this instant! Miss Abbott is recovering from a traumatic emotional episode! I will not have you disturbing her further.”

Harry ignored both women as he stalked towards Hannah’s bed. “Harry, we didn’t realize... we thought... I’m sorry...” Hannah tried to plead with him in a whiny voice.

“So you like to rummage around in other people’s minds do you? Ginny didn’t have any defenses. Let’s see how you like it. *Legilimens!*”

Harry tore at her outer tripwires not bothering to slow at the memories she attempted to bombard him with. Her core shield had only started to take shape, when he impacted on it crushing it like a bull in a proverbial china shop. He forced her to relive humiliation and fear. He witnessed Chelsea and her ambushing Ginny. Harry began whipping her most embarrassing and humiliating memories into a vortex around her mind. He wasn’t even bothering with looking at the memories as he fed the cyclone of shame and pain.

“*Tenbrarum!*” Harry heard Susan’s voice and suddenly he was blinded breaking the eye contact and the legilimency connection. “Harry! What in the hell were you doing? She doesn’t have her wand and she’s in a hospital bed! You need to calm down!”

“I was teaching her a lesson not to break into someone’s mind for something this stupid. *Finite Incantatem.*” Harry canceled out the blinding curse. Madam Pomfrey had her wand leveled at him and Molly Weasley stared at him in horror. Susan was red faced with anger. Others were coming into the room as his vision slowly came back into focus.

The infirmary door opened and a group of people came running into the room. They saw Harry Potter standing over the whimpering form of Hannah Abbott wand in hand. Peter Abbott’s wand came up instantly. “Get away from my daughter, you little bastard! *Pello Hostis!*” The banisher caught Harry and blew him out the window shattering the glass behind him and cutting into his skin. With roughly four stories to fall, he did the only thing he could think of.

The screams in the room had started instantly. Susan raced towards the window shouting, “*Accio Harry! Accio Harry! No! No! Accio Harry!*”

Lupin grabbed Peter Abbott’s wand out of the shocked wizard’s hand and punched him full across the face. The blow sent him sprawling to the ground. Dumbledore and the rest came into the turmoil.

“Where is Mr. Potter?”

“He was blown out the window by him!” Remus held the Abbott’s own wand to his temple. “If he is dead, I will kill you.”

“Peter!”

“I can’t see him. It’s too dark.” Susan cried lighting her wand and scanning into the darkness below. There was a tense silence for over a minute. Mrs. Abbott ran to her husband’s side as he looked up at the werewolf looming over him.

“That little bastard was attacking Hannah. I wasn’t thinking clearly. It just happened. It was an accident.” Peter said defiantly.

In the roar of yelling and confusion, it had been easy to overlook the floo activating. An angry Harry Potter stumbled out of it, cut and bleeding on his arm and forehead. His emergency Portkey clutched in his hand, having taken a quick trip back to his house and heading straight back through the floo. “Blowing a person out of a window does not ‘accidentally’ happen, Mr. Abbott. Give him his wand back, Remus. He had his shot at me, now it’s my turn. Get on your feet, Abbott and face me like a man.”

## Chapter 24 – Divided Loyalties

“Come on Abbott. You were willing to kill me a minute ago. I’m giving you the chance you didn’t give me a second ago. Go ahead Remus. Give him his wand back. I won’t hurt him – much.”

Everyone in the room looked upon the cold expression on the face of Harry Potter. His luminous green eyes were narrow slits of anger. A trickle of blood ran down his cheek gashed from the glass window he had been tossed out of a moment ago. Several scrapes and other minor cuts decorated his arms.

“I don’t think I should give him his wand back Harry.” Remus Lupin said each word very slowly. “We need to take a step back and calm down.”

“Indeed, Mr. Potter. Harry please lower your wand. Peter exercised poor judgement. He was under the impression that you were threatening his eldest daughter.” The still raspy voice of Albus Dumbledore intervened.

Harry ignored both of them. “What makes you think you could succeed where Voldemort failed? I told your daughters to stay out of my business, but they couldn’t follow a single, simple request could they? I’m out trying to stop Voldemort and end this war. The way my so called ‘allies’ treat me is making me wonder why I am even bother. I killed two men tonight, if you can call Lucius Malfoy a man. I fought Voldemort again tonight. Look at Dumbledore. That is what happens when you try to go after him in a stand up fight. Why am I even justifying myself to you? I come back only to find that Ginny is in agony because your daughters can’t leave well enough alone. Breaking into her mind, for something this stupid! Thinking I was cheating on Susan! I barely have time in my life for her! I don’t even want to subject her to my life – much less somebody else!”

“What did you do to my daughter?” Peter Abbott said with false bravado trying to steer the conversation in a different direction. Potter’s wand wasn’t pointed directly at him at the moment, but that could change anytime now.



"The same thing they did to Ginny. Showed her what it is like when someone breaks in to your mind. Hannah at least had the means to defend herself. Apparently, I got the wrong sister. Hannah only stole Ginny's wand and bound her while Chelsea mind raped Ginny. Obviously, blatant overreacting to a situation runs in the family. You could have stunned me or bound me. Instead, you banished me right out the window. Give me a reason not to make it three men that I've killed tonight."

"Harry!" came Molly Weasley's distinctive shrill cry. Others joined in with shouts of shock and surprise that Harry had killed someone.

"Mr. Potter!" his head of house shouted.

"Enough!" Dumbledore croaked trying to regain control of the situation, while trying to analyze Harry's statement.

Harry spun to the group of wizards and witches surrounding him. "No! It's enough when I say it's enough! Which one of you almost died tonight? Which one of you fought Voldemort tonight? Most of you can't even say his fake name without quivering in fear!"

Dumbledore started to speak, but Susan's loud voice carried over the rest of the others as she limped towards Harry and put her hand on his shoulder. "Harry, stop this now! There's been enough fighting, anger and dark magic! You don't want to duel Mr. Abbott."

"Who says I want to duel him? I just want to show him what being banished out a fourth story window feels like."

"Harry, please calm down. We have other matters to discuss. There is no need..." The headmaster started.

"I'll handle this if you don't mind." Susan said coldly cutting off Dumbledore. She looked back at Harry in exasperation. "If you and Mr. Abbott fought, they would be scraping pieces of him off the walls. You'd destroy him, which is exactly why you will not fight him. You don't need to fight everyone, Harry. Not every second is a life or death situation. Violence can't solve everything!"

"Funny with no Portkey, I would have gone splat a minute ago. So, I am just supposed to let this go? Walk away? Like nothing happened?"

"Yes! No! Fuck! I don't know Harry, but what's it going to solve? Is he really your enemy? Is he the one you want to kill? Beating the snot out of him proves what? That you're stronger? Might doesn't make right! Is what you just did to Hannah any more right than what they did to Ginny? You were wrong! She was wrong, but dammit, she's my best friend! I'm practically a part of their family! If Hermione did anything like this would you look the other way while I went berserk? Leave here now! Go back to your house and calm down!"

"My house huh? So you're choosing them over me?" Harry's anger had a new focus.

"No, you idiot! Didn't you understand a word I was saying? Don't be so thick!"

"I must be, because I think you've made yourself perfectly clear." Harry said brushing her hand off his shoulder. "Fine, I'll go back to my house unless you want to curse me again, Susan. Peter wasn't the only one to curse me this evening was he? If I hadn't been blinded by you, that banisher would have never gotten near me. You can stay here with your family. I don't need you. I don't need any of you." Harry's voice spit out her name with a rancor normally reserved for Snape or Malfoy. He went right back to the floo and disappeared.

Susan stood there with an ashen face and angry tears in her eyes staring at the flickering flames. She slowly turned and looked at all the silent faces in the infirmary, most of which stared back at her in shame.

Peter Abbott moved up next to her and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Susan, you should rethink you relationship with him."

He had barely finished the sentence when her cane smashed into his gut doubling him over. "How dare you! I just saved your life and you have the gall to say that! He was going to kill you! I had the situation under control and then you come in here and almost kill him. Harry thinks I betrayed him by stopping him. Try and hurt him again and

you won't have to worry about what he will do to you. You'll have to worry about me!"

Utter silence followed her outburst as she used her cane and moved slowly to the door. Supporting herself with one hand on the stonework beside the entrance, she turned again to the crowd. When she spoke her voice was a straining with barely repressed anger, "He's trying so hard to save you all. How many sixteen year olds are willing to become killers for people they barely know? I'm trying to save him from himself. Don't make my job any harder than it already is."

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Harry stumbled out of the floo and caught himself. Sturgis Podmore stepped in from the parlor. "Harry are you okay? You're bleeding. What happened?"

"Stupid bloody wankers! All of them!" Harry yelled and began casting some minor first aid charms on his arm. Sturgis offered to take care of the wound on his face as he tried to clear his head. If he had a choice between cursing Peter Abbott or Severus Snape right now it would be a tough decision. He wanted to destroy something or someone. There was nothing immediately available and destroying his property didn't sound like fun. However, Harry had a better idea.

"Want to talk about it? If you don't want to that's okay. We could also see who can drink the other under the table?"

"No. Thanks for your offer though. I'm a lightweight when it comes to alcohol." Harry shook his head. "I need to go firecall the Minister. I have some information for him." Harry fully intended to attach a price tag to his information. He was going to destroy something tonight.

"Did you let Dumbledore know?"

"No didn't get a chance. The Order is so short on fighters that they wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Besides, I have had about as much of the Order as I can stomach tonight. – present company excluded." Harry liked Sturgis. The Minister was still pushing through his pardon. Rufus had promised that it would be finalized within a week. The hamster animagus was looking forward to meeting up with

his family in Switzerland after his pardon. Until then he had been keeping Harry company, giving some transfiguration and animagus pointers. "Tomorrow, I want your help. I might have found a way to make some substantial progress on becoming an animagus."

"Harry, we haven't even finished the potion to determine if you can become one." Sturgis said conjuring a temporary comb. "Here, brush your hair. It looks like there is still some glass in there. People don't just decide to become an animagus in a week."

Harry just shook his head and brushed some of the glass from his hair. A quick word to Dobby and a moment later Harry's body armor appeared in its holding case. He grabbed some floo powder and whispered the Minister's private floo address. For a brief minute, Harry spoke with one of the aurors assigned to Scrimgeour's protective unit before the Minister was summoned into the room.

"Harry, I am temporarily lifting the restriction on access. As soon as the flames turn blue on your end you can come through."

A minute later Harry stepped through into the Scrimgeour parlor. Two aurors had their wands trained on him. "Apologies Harry, security precautions and all that. We've had to increase our protection level lately. If you would be so kind as to surrender your wand to one of my bodyguards and well sit down and have a chat."

"What happened?" Harry said handing his wand to the waiting auror and was checked for a second wand.

"Mother In Law problems."

"Huh?"

"Someone used an imperio on my dear Mother in Law. I always used to joke with Laura, when we first married that her mother would kill me if she had the chance. I never dreamed it would actually happen. What can the ministry do for you this evening Lord Potter?" Rufus casually dismissed the attempt on his life and gestured for the aurors

"I have learned some information that I need to share; the location of three of Tom Riddle's safe houses. It's guaranteed reliable."

“May I ask where you got this information?”

“The mind of a death eater – Peter Pettigrew was Riddle’s secret keeper. He should be dead now. Blaise Zabini and Marcia Compton have been freed and are at Hogwarts. They had Viktor Krum and some other witch as well. Lucius Malfoy is dead. You should be able to use this for some favorable press.”

“I was under the impression that Dumbledore was in no position to launch any assaults right now after the last one.” Scrimgeour said clearly amazed at the developments. He allowed himself the luxury of a moment to savor how this could be spun to his advantage.

“It wasn’t Dumbledore sanctioned.”

“I didn’t realize you had your own group of supporters. May I be so bold as to ask how many you have?” Rufus considered this an even better turn of events.

“You’re looking at all of them. It’s just me, myself and I.” Harry said with a hint of disgust in his voice.

“Going solo, isn’t advisable Harry. You are a very powerful wizard, but even the powerful one’s get in over their heads. If you ever find yourself in that situation again, contact me and I’ll get you the back up you need. Now that I have given you a token scolding, damn fine work! Give me the locations and I will have strike teams ready to go in two hours.”

“I want to go along.”

“Harry, it sounds like you’ve done enough this evening. Let someone else shoulder the burden. My aurors should be more than capable.”

“Call it excess rage. I want to blow something up tonight. I’d rather it be a Death Eater safe house. Otherwise, I am going to destroy a bunch of stuff I own. This seems more practical.”

“Still, I do not think this is wise.” Scrimgeour said halfheartedly. He already knew where this was headed.

"It's my price for the information. Besides, we could be there together and really help your cause." Harry offered an olive branch.

"Very well, have you set a price for your retainer?" Scrimgeour asked knowing that this indeed could go a long way towards furthering his cause.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand."

The Minister rummaged around in his pocket. "I made you a hit wizard. They don't work for free. I'll need to retain your services for this raid. I have two galleons, three sickles and a knut. Will that suffice?"

Harry smiled and pocketed the money. "Sir, you've just rented yourself a hit wizard. I've already got my armor with me. I haven't thanked you for it have I?"

"No, if you've sent a thank you note it hasn't reached my desk yet, but I'll excuse the social faux pas. You have been very busy it seems. I'll grab my kit, kiss the wife, and we'll floo to headquarters and get this raid going."

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Susan buried her head in the pillows. The room she had been sharing with Harry in the Ravenclaw tower seemed even emptier devoid of his presence. Her weak link with Harry had allowed her to feel his out of control rage. She thought her heart had stopped as he was thrown through the window. She couldn't sense him seconds after that and thought he was gone. For those brief seconds scanning out into the darkness, she felt like she had lost her Mum and Aunt all over again, only to have him come flying out the floo looking to kill Hannah's father.

She stopped him. Susan doubted that anyone else could have gotten him to back down. She knew she had paid a price for stopping him. He saw what she did as a betrayal. That much was certain. When he calmed down she would reason with him.

"I heard a little of what happened. Want some company?" Hermione Granger's voice came from the doorway.

Susan wiped her tear streaks off on the pillow and looked at the girl most of the school assumed Harry was destined to end up with. "Not particularly, but come on in Hermione."

"Thanks. Ron will be along in a moment." The female Gryffindor entered and sat on the bed next to the one Susan was occupying. "Funny, I always figured I would be having these conversations with a different red head. How is Ginny? I heard that she was in the hospital wing."

Susan began to explain as Ron entered carrying a tray bearing a tub of rocky road ice cream and three bowls. Susan didn't leave anything out, but made sure they put up privacy wards before continuing. Both were shocked to learn what Harry and Ginny were up to. She described watching Harry through the enchanted mirror free the hostages, kill Lucius Malfoy and encounter Voldemort. She couldn't hear the conversation and had no explanation why Harry sat down and talked to him. She finished with the encounter in the infirmary and Harry's angry departure. They were repulsed by Harry's use of Dark Magic, but seemed to shake it off rather quickly.

"Ron, take the ice cream back and bring two six packs. This calls for more than comfort food."

"Mione, you've already had a couple. Are you sure you want more?"

Ron nodded and called for a house elf named Sappy. The little house elf took the ice cream away and reappeared with two six packs of something called Kirin.

"What's that?" Susan wondered if it was a new flavor of butterbeer.

"Oh that's a brand of Japanese beer. Here have one."

"How on earth did you get the house elves to bring you alcohol?" Granger was capable of doing some amazing things, but this was every Hogwarts student's fantasy.

“It’s really Ron’s doing. Sorry, I get a little giggly when I am tipsy. Do you remember how I kept campaigning to free all the house elves?” Susan cringed recalling SPEW all too well. “I see you do. Well, eventually the elves stopped doing things for me like my laundry, my sheets, ruining my food at mealtime and whatnot. I responded by trying even harder. I didn’t mind doing my own cleaning, but then they started hiding my books and my notes. Right before the OWLs, I was just about prepared to start hexing some sense into them. When we got here for the summer, Ron decided to intercede and negotiate a peace treaty between myself and the house elves of Hogwarts. For my part, I am allowed to make a two hour presentation four times a year to the elves on the benefits of seeking their freedom provided I no longer try to free them against their will.”

“That doesn’t explain how you got them to bring you real beer! Wow, this is pretty good.” Susan said taking another swig.

“My dad belongs to a Beers from around the World club, this is my favorite. Anyway in return for my concessions the house elves were forced to make some concessions of their own. Apparently, the agreement they have with the headmaster not to provide alcohol has some loopholes in it. This is coming from my father’s basement. So, it’s Granger family property. They are merely delivering this cardboard container to me. The fact that it contains six bottles of beer is irrelevant. Also since it is my property, there is no currency transaction taking place. That restriction is in place so that students can’t use house elves as personal shoppers during the school year.”

Susan regarded Hermione with awe. The unofficial holy grail of Hogwarts was getting the house elves to provide alcohol. “Words fail me. No wonder you are the top of the year.”

“I’m not. I’m number two in our class and there is pretty much no conceivable way I’ll overtake the other person.”

“Who is it then? It must be Padma or Lisa?”

“No. I passed them last year. They are number three and four. Being petrified my second year did a number on my grades. Everyone let me do make up work except for the potions master that shall no longer be named. Even Dumbledore couldn’t make him let me do



extra credit. So, I got an Exceeds Expectations in second year potions.”

“So who’s number one?”

Ron looked up with a smug grin on his face and said in a very serious tone, “I am.”

Hermione laughed and spun at him giving him a pat on his shoulders, “Sure you are, Ron. You’re number one in my heart, you silly delusional boy. No, the top student of our class is none other than Mandy Brockelhurst.”

Susan, who had almost snorted a mouthful of beer with Ron’s false statement barely controlled her second gagging. “Wait a minute! I have never seen her at our study groups. She’s always snogging Terry like the test answers are written on his tonsils and her tongue can read Braille. You’ve got to be kidding? You’re not! How?”

“She has a near photographic memory with over ninety percent total recall. She reads a book and six months later – she can quote you page and paragraph almost without fail. It’s sickening, really. She spends all her time working on her practicals so she won’t slip up and the rest of her time with Terry. He doesn’t seem to mind that he is near the bottom of the class. He’s the lowest ranked Claw in the past fifty years and rather proud of it. I’m not disappointed though. She’ll have the grades, but I have the fame. The people behind the chocolate frog company owed me, wanting to do Ron, Harry and I on their next set of cards. I’m reasonably certain that Mandy isn’t going to end up on a chocolate frog card anytime soon, though you just might.”

“Does Harry know about this yet?”

“No, I only got it two days ago. I’ll talk to him about it before school starts if he ever gets a break. We’re going to get him to donate his licensing fees to St. Mungo’s like Dumbledore does. I was hoping to get you in our corner before we talked to him. Harry isn’t in it for the fame, but it is still a great honor. Since Ron and I are older, he’d be the youngest person ever to be put on one.”

Susan sobered. The tears were threatening again. Quietly she said, "I don't know how much help I can be right now. He thinks I betrayed him. Maybe, I'm the wrong girl for him?"

Hermione crossed over and sat down next to her. Susan thought, 'She's apparently more boisterous, after a bit of alcohol gets in her system.' Ron sat on Hermione's other side.

"Did you ever wonder why I didn't make a play for Harry? Lord knows everyone thought I was going to."

Ron looked on arching an eyebrow, "Should I be listening to this? Do I even want to know?"

"Oh pish, you! We've already had this discussion. You know you're the one for me. Susan, I didn't want to be Harry's girlfriend. I'm his best friend and I know what you're going through. I worry about him enough as it is! He has a way of consuming your life. I'd be an obsessive neurotic mess as his girlfriend, watching him go off and do all those things he does. I'm a control freak and he has authority issues."

Ron interrupted with a mocking laugh. "I disagree. Harry doesn't really have authority issues. They have issues with him, but you're spot on about the control freak thing." He was forced to duck a pillow.

"Prat! Harry deserves unconditional support, while having precious little to spare in return. Don't get me wrong, it's not his fault he is stuck in the center of a war. I'd never be the best I could be in his shadow, which is exactly where I would have been. I want to be known for my achievements first and not for who I happen to be dating. Harry and I would be too competitive together. He's so powerful. We wouldn't have worked. I wouldn't be able to win unless he let me and it would piss me off. Basically, the same reason I can't date Mandy." Hermione stopped to let her last outlandish statement sink in, before laughing uncontrollably for a minute. She proceeded to smack Ron as he mentioned that he was trying to picture it.

"If he didn't have this war hanging over his head, all those other things, and Snape for five years, he probably could have been top of the class, or more likely a pranking plague that would put his father's

little group to shame. I wonder who his little helper would have been? Any ideas, oh boyfriend of mine?"

"We would have been better than his dad, easily. Anyway, what my slightly drunken girlfriend is saying is that with me, she only has to worry about being the second prettiest person in the relationship, getting over her chess inferiority complex, and being humbled by my vastly superior knowledge of what matters the most – quidditch. I plan to support her quest for world domination every step of the way."

Hermione paused shaking her head at Ron's false pompousness taking another long drink from her beer and giving her boyfriend a sidelong glance before again smacking Ron playfully on the arm. "But I'll still have plenty of time to worry about Harry, while curling up with this pillock."

Susan noticed Ron swell with pride at Hermione's statement. She was surprised how a little alcohol could make Hermione so feisty. "So where does this leave me with Harry?"

"You're doing the right thing. Standing by him and stopping him from doing something he'll regret. He'll realize it to eventually, though getting him to admit it will be a feat in itself. Harry isn't good with his feelings as a result of upbringing. He has authority issues. Hmm I already said that didn't I? Well it's worth repeating. He has attachment issues. I had thought he would have intimacy issues, but that seems not to be the case. Next time you see him, you show him that you have no intentions of turning on him. He'll resist you, but I've seen you can hold your own against him and for Merlin's sake don't be a push over. He'll lose respect for you. Stand your ground in a fight with him. If you're wrong, admit it and take your punishment. If you aren't then don't you dare roll over on him and give up without a fight! Now do you see why I didn't want to get involved with him? Susan, you've signed up for your own personal war and it will outlast the current war for a few years. Ron and I will be here for you as well as Harry."

Ron smiled at Susan, "Don't ever make me say this in public, but I think you're doing a better job than Ginny could have. After Hermione told me all this, I sat back and thought about it. I don't think she is up

to the task – maybe in a few years, but not now. I hope this oath breaking isn't too serious on her. There's still twenty-five minutes before lockdown, I'm going to get Fred and we'll go check on Ginny. You two stay here and do that 'Girl Talk' thing. If you need me to try and talk some sense into Harry, just let me know."

"Thank you both. I just hope Harry isn't doing something rash and stupid right now." Susan said giving them both a hug.

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"So that's it. You're leaving. The first sign of difficulties and you're going to bail. Can't say I'm surprised. Well good riddance!" Bill muttered with a hint of frustration and anger. It had been a bad idea to get involved with a teenager – a really bad idea. He had been the envy of the other guys at the bank, but having a nineteen year old girlfriend wasn't without a downside. It was especially difficult when his soon to be ex-girlfriend was not used to someone being able to resist her charms and stand up to her. In a way, she was not as mature as he had expected. It probably came from having males cater to her every whim. Bill wondered if the only thing she was attracted to had been his looks and his ability to resist her. The young beauty in front of him looked suddenly superficial. The sex had been good, great even, but it wasn't worth begging over. Nothing is worth that.

"I have already given my notice to the bank and told the Headmaster that I will work for his agenda back in France. The Veela remain neutral at the moment, but may very well follow the way of the French Vampires. We had fun William, but I am not ready to settle down. I also don't like being in a war zone." Fleur said. Both knew she was lying. It was his scars. The wounds inflicted by that vampire and contaminated with the creature's blood hadn't healed very well. Bill noticed that on the few occasions since his injury that they had gone out on the town, she had walked on his opposite side refusing to look on his wounds. She had canceled three dinners with him last week and the best reason he could come up with was that she was ashamed to be seen out in public with his scarred visage.

In the days following his injury, she had smothered him with affection and talked of taking a vacation to a villa owned by her family. That talk died when the bandages came off. It was replaced with talk of seeing cosmetic specialists. Bill mentioned that he couldn't afford it. His monies from Sirius Black had already been invested in some high yield short-term ventures and could not be liquidated for twelve months without a substantial penalty. Fleur had replied that he should ask his parents, or Harry for the money, perhaps getting a loan, and she even went so far as to hint that she could ask her parents. He didn't consider the matter that urgent, but apparently she did. It was their first but not last fight on this topic. The smothering affection ended shortly after that.

"That doesn't explain why you are moving out of here now. If I hadn't gotten off shift early, I wouldn't even have known. Let me guess, you were going to leave a fucking note, weren't you?"

"An old classmate of mine is putting me up for the remainder of my time here in England. Staying here would be too uncomfortable for us both. It is for the best. Don't make this harder than it already is." He wondered how many other of Fleur's boyfriends had been on the receiving end of similar lines. She wasn't even slipping into her French accent, which she did almost every time she started to get emotional. Bill knew enough to understand that she was just 'owling in' this performance.

"Well as long as it's what's best for you, have fun with that Aimee girl. Don't let the floo burn you in your ass on the way out." He said with a hint of bitterness. She chose to ignore his comments.

"I think I have everything. Here is the address where I will be staying if you come across anything else. Only use it, if you consider it to be urgent. I will do my best to maintain a professional relationship for my last two weeks at the bank. I hope you will do the same. I really wish you the best and don't want our breakup to affect your future with the Goblins."

Bill laughed. She expected him to turn into some kind of lovesick stalker. "Fleur, don't flatter yourself! I'm not one of those simpering boys that follow you around all the time. Your little charms don't turn

me into a gibbering baboon. Without them you're just a pretty face with an immature personality. Trust me, even if I do get these scars fixed, it will be a cold day in hell before I take you back. Go back to dating people you can control, but you know you'll never find something that lasts with them. Maybe one day when you grow up, you'll realize that."

Bill watched as his verbal slap penetrated her well-practiced and rehearsed break up speech. She hurled a string of French vulgarities at him so fast he couldn't keep up and apparated out of his flat with a very loud crack. He watched the empty space where she had been for a minute or two before his glowstone started flashing and emitting a whistle. Gringott's was reactivating his team of cursebreakers at this time of night after just getting off a shift. He slipped on his body armor back on and wondered what the latest crisis was.

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Director Dawson stood up in the front of the room. "Condition One operational security is in affect. No members of this briefing will be allowed near a floo. You are not to leave the building except via the Portkey pad. This is a Search and Destroy mission. We have three targets tonight. The first and highest priority is a small country manor in Essex near Chelmsford. It is the area in which we should expect the most resistance. Our intel suggests that the Dark Forces have been quartering some of their foreign fighters there. An agent was dispatched there an hour ago and confirms that there are wards in place consistent with the wards used by other havens of the enemy."

"How many Death Eater's are we expecting?" A voice from the crowd asked.

"Eight to ten. Alpha and Beta Strike teams will consist of eight aurors in each Perkins and Lydell are in charge. Charlie Break will consist of three cursebreakers from Gringott's and their hitwizard escort, Mr. Potter with Senior Cursebreaker Weasley is in charge. Delta Command will consist of myself, Minister Scrimgeour, two additional aurors, a combat photographer, and Ms. Rita Skeeter – who is here as a special guest of the Minister to cover tonight's festivities. The

Minister and I are in overall command. Echo Forensics will consist of four DMLE evidence recovery personnel.”

Harry met Bill’s shocked eyes. He could feel the weight of the gazes on him. He looked over at Rita, who looked very uncomfortable in a DMLE issue combat vest. Harry didn’t let the glares bother him. He had fought the Dark Tosser tonight. Lavender had been just as stunned to see Harry follow the Minister and his two aurors into Headquarters.

“Beta Strike will run the floo jammer, anti-portkey, and anti-apparition wards while Charlie Break drops the enemy wards. When the wards are down, Charlie Break will assume responsibility for the anti-escape wards and Beta Strike will shift into assault mode. Alpha Strike will lead the assault from the east. Beta Strike’s best approach is from the South. Delta Command will be positioned to the Southwest and commit only if necessary. Echo Forensics will remain at Auror HQ until summoned once the hostiles have been neutralized. Elimination of the threat is first priority. Take prisoners where you can, it is important that we learn the extent of his foreign recruitment, but the priority remains elimination of the target. Orange sparks followed by three cannonblast charms is *Sauve Qui Peut*. It will be signaled from the Southwest by Delta Command only. Fallback via portkeys to Headquarters, if it becomes necessary. When target one is secure, the Minister and I will confer and make the decision to proceed to target number two. Questions? None? Very well, target number two is a ...”

Harry listened trying to soak in every detail. He was moderately impressed by the professionalism of the acting Director of Magical Law Enforcement. The aurors asked several questions and received various answers. The Minister and Director Dawson agreed to use one strike force rather than trying to assemble more personnel and risk the possibility of losing the element of surprise. The briefing concluded after ten more minutes with the Director announcing Assembly on the Departure pad in five minutes. Several aurors stepped behind partitions to don their protective gear. Bill moved in on him like a hawk.

“Evening Harry, what in blazes are you doing here?”

“Nice to see you to Bill. I am your hit wizard escort this evening.”

“Do they know you are here?”

“Well since you are a member of ‘they’ and you know I am here, then the answer to your question is yes. Oh don’t give me that look Bill. Where in Merlin’s name do you think they got this intelligence?”

“You?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Later. I’m about to get a bug problem. I’m surprised it took her that long to get over here. Never a fly swatter around when you need one.” Bill turned to see Rita Skeeter approaching.

“Well, well, Hit Wizard Potter, I am impressed. It’s so very nice to see you again Harry. Do you have a moment?”

“Perhaps later Rita. I was just discussing my role with the Cursebreaking team leader. We have details to finalize before we depart, so if you will excuse us. I am sure the Minister will want to speak with you. He did arrange for you to come along on such short notice.” Harry smiled and dismissed her. “What do you need from me Bill?”

“Once we begin chanting keep us covered. We’re mostly immobile while we are doing the anti-escape curses. Use spells, rocks, wood and anything else you can find to shield us. If nothing is going on, watch me. I’ll be doing the floo jammer. By the end of the night, I might need your help with it. It is one of the most draining chants you can do. As for breaking down the wards, if I signal for you to do it I want you to unleash you’re biggest, nastiest stuff against their shielding. You’re one powerful lad. We could knock their wards down by stealth, but it would take hours. We don’t care if they know we are coming, so this is all about brute force.”

“I’ll use the same spell Susan used in Gringott’s.”



“Oh the one that destroyed one of the Gargoyles? That’ll do nicely. Remind me sometime and I’ll swing by and teach you some basic ward hammers. How are the two of you getting along?”

Harry shook his head and muttered. “Not so great right now. Some things happened tonight. Ginny is in the infirmary. She’s out of danger, but someone forced her to violate an oath of secrecy that she swore to me. There were some angry words exchanged, I was thrown out of the infirmary window, and to make a long story short – I am here and I am looking to blow something up.”

“When this is over, I want the long story. You said Ginny’s out of danger. Is she hurt?”

“I don’t know. The moment I got into the ward, I released her from her oath. She’s with Poppy and she’s resting. That’s all I can tell you. How’s Fleur?”

“Wouldn’t know. Bitch just left me five minutes before I got here. Want’s to go back to France. Aren’t we a pair of lonesome losers? When they signal for the forensics team, we’ll have about fifteen minutes before moving on to the second target. I’ll put up a privacy ward and you’ll tell me as much as you can, deal?”

“Deal. I promise you, I wouldn’t have made her swear the oath if it wasn’t necessary.”

“I know. Come on. Let’s go to the platform. You ready for this?”

“Damn straight.”

Harry took his position with the rest of the Charlie Break team. They were handed a small hoop. Five seconds later they were whisked to their staging area.

“Okay team, let’s tear them down! Geoff, Sandy take down the perimeter wards. I’ll scan for traps.” Harry watched the two cursebreakers start chanting a long and complex incantation. A faint glow began surrounding the property. Bill fired a ward hammer. It slammed into the shields with a resounding gong. “Harry, blow through that shield.” He said and launched into his own chant making

several different auras glow. Harry felt the anti-apparition wards slam down from the Beta strike team.

*"Tero atque Contrucido'!"* The slow beam of energy started moving towards the property. Harry felt the same pull on his power Susan described. The aura's flared and pulsed as the siege engine spell started pushing through wards and hitting the shield protecting the building.

The female cursebreaker whistled while taking a deep breath to prepare for her next incantation. "I apologize Mr. Potter. I thought you and that reporter being here was some kind of stupid publicity stunt. That spell is no publicity stunt." Harry could only grunt in reply, as he poured his energy into the siege engine spell. Bill instructed the two to destroy the layers of traps he had illuminated while he joined in with his own spells. Blasters and other spells joined in from what could only be Alpha Strike team. The wards lasted only another minute under the combined assault. Several curses started coming out the windows. Harry and Bill's spell collapsed the shield. The spell smashed through the door and continued into the house.

Harry sagged into the ground from the effort of smashing the wards. Bill, Geoff and Sandy started chanting the anti-escape curses. Harry organized some debris in front of him. He shielded a couple of curses, including using a rusted wheelbarrow to block a killing curse. It probably wouldn't have threatened anyone, but Harry didn't want to take a chance. A broom rider shot out of the second floor window dodging curses.

"Bill, the broom rider!" Harry said pulling his firebolt out and enlarging it.

"Alpha and Beta have breached. I am going to let up on the anti-floo and provide cover. Harry, run that fucker into the ground."

Harry kicked off the ground and headed on an intercept course. The rider was heading towards Delta Command and having to shield against curses coming from the ground and trying to climb to gain altitude. Harry slipped in behind him and concentrated on picking up speed. The other rider was on a fast broom, but it might even be another firebolt. Harry flattened himself on his broom and closed to

within 10 meters. Any second, and the rider would be out of the warded area and free to apparate or portkey away. Though everything Harry had ever read said that a person trying portkeys or apparition at high speeds is at a greater risk for accidents. The rider turned just in time to dodge Harry's pair of stunners. With the element of surprise lost, Harry began hurling curses at the rider. He recognized some veteran moves on the broom. The rider was skilled. Harry dodged return fire. It was the killing curse.

'So that's the way he wants to be. *Lacero! Impactus!*' Harry began countering with violent curses. The cutter missed, but the bludgeoner slammed into the target and almost separated him from his broom. The sudden change in the target's speed caused Harry's next curse and the broom rider's curse to go wide of each other.

His prey pulled into a dive heading towards a cluster of trees. 'Trying to negate my speed advantage huh? Bet he'll be surprised when I don't slow down!' Harry jerked his broom and swerved left letting the jet of flames pass to his side. His opponent tapped his own head using a disillusionment spell and starting to fade from view. The riders broom would remain, but it would be a harder target to spot in the night sky. He focused on the broom like it was a snitch. This one wasn't going to get away. He would have to stop him before he entered the trees, otherwise the thin piece of wood could easily disappear into the night. Harry fired two blasting curses, which were dodged. It looked like his opponent would have a ten meter lead on him entering the forest. Harry prepared the spell he was certain would work. He would need to be closer to the trees. He needed to see which part of the forest he was going to enter. There!

"*Animoare Arboris!*" Harry yelled seconds before the disillusioned broom rider was to enter the forest. The two trees, which should have been a portal to freedom for the Death Eater instead became a wooden web of death as the limbs of the two trees became alive with magic and meshed together like a net. If Harry had to guess, the Death Eater hit that mess going somewhere in the neighborhood of One Hundred kilometers per hour. He heard a scream and a wet slapping sound. Harry braked and landed where he thought the body would be. Several *Finite Incantems* later a gory mess of what used to be a human being appeared. "*Accio Broom!*" Harry said gesturing into

the forest. He felt a resistance to the spell. Walking into the forest he followed the feeling of resistance. It was either pinned or had anti-summoning charms placed on it. He found the broom. Casting a quick light spell, he found it was indeed a firebolt. A Bulgarian Flag and the name Piotr Levski were engraved on a custom handgrip. He remembered the name Levski from Krum's team. He had been a chaser.

Harry walked out of the forest carrying both firebolts. He shrunk Levski's and climbed back on his. It looked like the battle was all over. He headed towards the house.

"Potter did the broom rider get away?" Director Dawson asked. Over her shoulder, Harry could see Rita writing furiously.

"No. He's dead. The body is right by those trees." Harry said gesturing back behind him.

"Good that means no one got out to warn anyone else. Nice work Potter, we'll have one of the forensic team retrieve the body. Rejoin Charlie Break. Let your team leader know that it will be thirty minutes before we move to our second target."

"Harry! Please a moment of your time. What happened out there? Did you kill that man?"

"Indirectly, he tried to get away from me by trying to head into a forest. He was moving too fast and hit the trees." Harry didn't really feel like telling her the whole truth.

"How does this make you feel, knowing that a man is dead out there?"

"Rita, he was a Death Eater. I'm not happy that he died, but I am not going to lose any sleep over it. He worked for the same man that has been trying to kill me since I was a baby. He made his choice, when he took Tom Riddle's fancy tattoo. If he hadn't already killed someone, he was going to. If you are going to quote me make sure it is an accurate quote Ms. Skeeter – none of your usual embellishing. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to get back to my team leader."

Harry walked back to alert Bill to the news. The three cursebreakers were relaxing and trying to regain their strength for the task ahead. Bill left the other two and moved over to speak to Harry.

“Bill set the privacy wards really tight. Keep an eye on Skeeter. If she makes one move over towards us, let me know. If you don’t know she is a beetle animagus.”

“Oh in that case, I’ll put an insect repeller around us. That’ll keep her back. Now spill.” Bill commanded.

Harry took a deep breath. He knew that Bill didn’t have the usual prejudices against the use of Dark Magic. He had pulled Harry aside and thanked him for his quick action in using the killing curse to save his life. Then again, last time Bill’s baby sister hadn’t been involved.

## Chapter 25 – A Lesson in Uncomfortable Truths

"Thank you for taking me in on such short notice. You are too kind." Fleur thanked her again and wiped the tears out of her puffy eyes with a handkerchief.

"Nonsense, Fleur. We Beauxbaton girls need to stick together!" Aimee Beaucourt pasted a sincere looking smile on her face and patted Fleur comfortingly. In the confusion following the gargoyles going on a rampage in the Bank's lobby, Aimee had kept her head and not gone for her wand. While milling around she came across her old classmate, Fleur Delacour. Aimee had been fairly close to the part Veela. She had been cordial and kind to the prissy she whore, where most had been jealous and vindictive. On the other hand Aimee had been envious of only Fleur's power. She was a pretty young woman, but her short brunette curls paled in comparison to Fleurs golden locks and magical aura. She often asked herself what would it be like to have that power over a man? She watched for the last three years as Fleur moved from one boyfriend to the next. Fleur was spoiled and a brat. She quickly became bored with her newest 'toy' and moved on to the next one. It was morbidly amusing to watch the many stages of Fleur as she went through various stages of having a boyfriend. She usually was a bit infatuated herself; talking about her latest conquest endlessly. That was the first stage. The chatter would gradually die off and a mild annoyance at all the smothering attention she was getting would begin. How long this stage lasted was usually determined by how good looking the boy was and whether or not the physical part of their relationship could hold Fleur's attention.

The longest Aimee had seen Fleur in the second stage was a full month, but the specimen had been exceptional. Eventually, the annoyance would reach a breaking point and Fleur would dismiss the poor confused boy. There would be begging, groveling and gift giving. It was Fleur's power that had made Aimee embrace her 'alternative lifestyle'. After watching the begging and groveling going on around her for years, she had no respect left for the male species in general. The one boy at school who could actually resist Fleur's advances, well he was heinously ugly. A few weeks would pass and it usually required an intervention from Madame Maxine, but the stalker phase would end. Without fail within a month, the cycle would begin anew.

Aimee Beaucourt would have loved to wield Fleur's power. She would have enthralled diplomats and powerful, wealthy men and used them for all that they were worth before discarding them. Instead, she watched it wasted on this vapid and utterly useless beauty currently in front of her crying her eyes out. The most use she had ever seen Fleur get out of her power had been to 'improve' her grades with the male members of the staff. Her guest lacked any ambition wanting to find someone who would love her despite her gift. From the looks of things she had found one and she turned out not to be equipped to deal with a real man instead of a love slave. Fleur was like some preteen, who thought she would run off into the sunset with Viktor Krum or something so foolish. She would have had pity for this William Weasley, but the Weasleys were enemies of her Master.

Aimee had come to England wanting the power promised by her Master and his followers. Her family was wealthy and provided for her, but she yearned for more than just baubles. The Dark Lord promised a world where those with the ambition to rule, will seize power and rule with a mighty hand. She wanted to be feared among witches. Other girls dreamed of the being princesses and such. Her line was distantly connected to the last links of the Le Fey's. She wanted to be Le Fey and this pretender in front of her was going to help her do that! She had spent an all too brief time in the company of Bellatrix. The fearsome witch had been rather expressive with Aimee. Aimee soon hoped to be doing those things to Fleur.

After their first luncheon together listening to the endless drone about how William would not consider her request to see a cosmetic healer, a plan began to form in the back of Aimee's mind. Here she was a Death Eater with easy access to an Order member. One of the Master's biggest problems was how to attack an unplottable target. The answer delivered herself this evening. It wasn't so much about breaking thorough an unbreakable charm. It was about controlling people who already had the access to the Order's Headquarters. The plan was brilliant in it's simplicity. The Master promised her a reward, when the plan succeeded. She would ask for this little bitch in front of her. She would dominate the little slut, like she should have been a long time ago.

Aimee had continued to see Fleur regularly and offered conflicting advice to Fleur who was ill prepared for someone that wasn't compelled to cater to her every capricious whim.

The result sat in front of her bawling in an undignified manner.

"I cannot believe that pig had the nerve to speak to me like that!" Fleur said in rapid fire French. "No one speaks to me in that manner. I will show him not to insult me!"

"Calm down, Fleur. Here have another glass of wine. It will help relax you."

"Thank you. He is a pig! Next time I see him I shall do like Circe and turn him into the swine that he really is." Aimee laughed at the declaration. From everything Fleur had said about her latest ex-boyfriend was that he was a very accomplished cursebreaker. She doubted Fleur's chances in a hexing match between the two of them. Were it not for the plan, she would have encouraged it to see just how badly William would humiliate her.

Fleur began to look tired. The drugged wine would be affecting Aimee as well, if she hadn't already taken an antidote and a sobering charm. Minutes later her companion was sleeping and snoring softly. Aimee smiled and floated Fleur towards the floor. After all, Aimee had just promised Fleur a place to stay. Fleur assumed it was here in Aimee's flat. No, her new little bitch probably wasn't going to like her accommodations, not one bit.

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"Feel better now?" Harry mumbled massaging his jaw from the ground. Bill had patiently listened to his explanation, carefully absorbing every word. There had been a momentary pause and Bill had placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. For a moment, it seemed like it would be a brotherly gesture of support for someone who had been having a rough go of it lately – fighting Dark Lords and whatnot. No, instead it was to steady him so that Bill's punch had a bit more oomph to it.



"Marginally," Bill said offering his hand to help him up. "Harry, what the fuck were you thinking dabbling in possession? More importantly, what the fuck were you thinking involving Ginny in your plan?"

"I wanted to kill him, now – before anyone else died! I offered your sister a chance to help me and she accepted."

"You took advantage of her, pure and simple. Don't try to deny it. She was looking for a way to get back in everyone's good graces. She's young and has been coddled and now she thinks everyone hates her. Then, you came along with this wild ass scheme after she lost her second brother in less than a month. What did you actually expect her to say, no? Give me a break, Harry! You knew she wasn't going to refuse you, didn't you? You played on her need for revenge and guilt at what happened to her friend Luna. She might be stuck in the middle of this war, but she is not an adult! If you had come to me, I would have helped you no questions asked. I'm of age! I can make those decisions. It's my right. Ginny is just about to turn fifteen. She doesn't have the right to make those choices."

Harry met his glare with an angry glare of his own. "Do you really want to know why I picked Ginny? I thought about asking you, but do you really want to know why I did? Fine! I had to choose from you, your father, your sister and Susan. I'm marrying Susan and I didn't think it was a good foundation for a marriage. Your dad is Dumbledore's man through and through. He wouldn't have approved and would've turned me in the moment I mentioned it. So that left you and Ginny. The book I read was by Tarazed Black. His portrait hangs in my parlor. I spoke with the portrait. He told me that my chances were greater if the target had a weaker mind. So, I had to choose the weaker of the two between a schoolgirl and a cursebreaker. If I had been trying to go after a target like Snape, I would have trained against you. I've been told he owes me a debt, but I was going up against the Rat. Pettigrew was a weakling. The biggest problem I had holding on wasn't because of his strong mind or great powers; he is fucking insane! Do you really think I wanted to do this?"

"No, I'm sure you didn't. That still doesn't excuse you from using an under aged girl in your plan. You didn't really care about that, did you? The ends justify the means, don't they Harry? Doesn't matter

who gets trampled over in the meantime, does it? Who does that sound like to you, Harry? Maybe the thing you're fighting? Maybe Dumbledore? One of them does anything they please, because he can. The other does everything out of his sense of the 'greater good'. What about you Harry? Where's your moral compass?"

"That's a nice speech, Bill. I tell you what. If I survive this war, I'll answer your question. Until then, I'll do what I have to do to survive. I am sick and tired of being lectured about my powers and responsibility. Riddle took Dumbledore apart, piece by piece. I watched the memory of it. In a fair fight, I won't even make him work up a sweat! The kicker is, somehow I'm the only one that can kill him. You know it, so don't give me that moral high horse shit. I didn't want Ginny to get hurt. I didn't make her violate her oath. You want to lash out at someone, lash out at the Abbotts. I've got bigger problems than you!"

"Oh if you want to challenge that Abbott wanker to a duel, I'll be your second in a heartbeat. Hell, you might end up being my second if I see him before you. I'm just telling you this; don't try fighting this war with kids. The more you involve them, the more they are going to get hurt. Hermione's smart, but don't you think there are people in the Ministry that know just as much as she does? Ron's loyal as hell, but do you want him taking on a Death Eater right now? How about Susan? Are you willing to send her into the slaughter as well? Look around us. There is a whole group of professionals out here tonight. These are the people you want to fight with. It's better to count on luck when you are with a whole bunch of people who are trained for a fight, rather than a bunch of half-trained kids!"

"Dammit Bill, that's not fair!"

"No kidding! You've got a shitty hand, Harry, but it's the only one you've got. The only thing you are going to get with involving your classmates is the opportunity to speak at their funerals. If this war drags on, it'll be their turn to fight, but don't drag them in now. It's like that auror auxiliary force. The first couple of times they got slaughtered. The Death Eaters chewed right through them. They are starting to hold their own, but there's a rumor that the Death Eaters don't want to crush them and give the Minister grounds for his draft."

The two of them sat there in silence for a minute. Finally Bill stuck his hand out. "I'll fight beside you and if necessary die beside you, but I won't let you use kids and send them to their death. They all look up to you. Yeah, I know you're just sixteen year old too, but they haven't seen what you have. They don't have a clue what it is really like. You do. Hell, Ron practically worships you. Watch how the other students behave around you this year. Even if you don't like it, you are their role model. Don't abuse that power."

"Does that mean you're applying for the moral compass job?" Harry said taking Bill's hand.

"I've just shy of thirty. You'd be better off listening to Remus, but if you need one, then yes. I'll have to start wearing gloves. Your jaw is boney. Glad I used my non-wand hand. Are we good?"

"Yeah, you made your point." Harry said scanning around and pleased to see Rita was still up by the house. He doubted that she would try to use her animagus form in front of the Minister and Director of Magical Law Enforcement, but this is Skeeter.

"Alright then, relax for a few minutes and get ready for the next location."

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Hestia Jones was glad to be back in England, even with the war on. There was something comforting about being home. Her husband, and children Ryan and Emily were still in Greece with the rest of the family for their annual 'Jones family vacation.' She had asked Dumbledore if she should stay, but he insisted that she go for appearances sake. Thankfully, Sturgis had been able to take up her shifts at Headquarters. She was still supposed to be gone for another week, but her guilt that Sturgis had been imprisoned in Azkaban and was now separated from his family until she returned. She couldn't enjoy Greece and begged off returning home early. Marcus and the kids would be fine without her.

She would check in tomorrow after she unpacked. This evening, she intended to take a long bath have a spot of tea and read a good book with only her wireless set for company.

Her houses perimeter wards activated. Her dueling skills weren't bad. She had fought Death Eaters in the first war and this one. A white misty fog seeped under the door and reformed into a large fruit bat. One of the Order members was outside and trying to contact her. She adjusted her robe and slid her shoes on. She was surprised that anyone would come here. Most everyone knew she was on vacation.

As she headed towards the door with her wand idly in her hand, she wondered out loud, "I wonder what Snape wants this evening?"

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The second site was a complete bust. The wards were there, but no one else was. The safe house was not in use. After some deliberation, the command team ordered the cursebreakers to repair the wards and add a few tripwires that would alert someone that the house was occupied. Bill also added a voice-activated ward that would cause the wards to drop if the phrase, 'Open up in the name of the Ministry' was said. It was widely agreed that any Death Eater inside would probably soil their knickers. The rest of the team left when Bill was putting the final touches on the new and 'improved' wards for the Death Eater safehouse. Director Dawson and the Minister agreed to get everyone staged for the next fight, if there was to be one.

Harry watched on as the cursebreakers continued to perform their work carving intricate patterns into the stonework of the building or etching wards in the air itself with their wands. He would need to learn about warding and how to take down wards. He thought about Bill's words and the need to avoid involving his generation in the fight. Bill was both right and wrong at the same time. The Death Eaters don't care about whether a person had taken their NEWTs yet. They will kill them just the same. Then again, the smartest way for your typical Hogwarts student to survive a fight with a Death Eater is not to be in a fight with one.

"We're done Harry. Are you ready to Portkey to the third safehouse?" Harry nodded and went over to grab the Portkey. Five seconds later they were whisked away to a rundown warehouse district.

It was apparent that things were already very wrong. The flashes of light and the screams were the first clue. The sinking feeling of dread

was the second. The ominous black shapes darting around the witches and wizards some already on the ground.

"Harry! Dementors! *Expecto Patronum!*"

Harry concentrated on his lethal patronus spell. The angry stag burst from his wand and began charging into the fray. Harry could sense them everywhere. He stayed close to the cursebreakers protected by Bill's wolfhound, a gargoye and some large bird. Prongs had already killed one dementor and was leaping at a second.

"They're all over the place. How many do you think there are?" Bill asked.

Harry looked and saw the mass in the night sky. He swallowed hard. "I think they're all here."

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"Master, your servant will live. He is weak, but resting at the moment." Georgina Crabbe bowed her head in servitude to Voldemort.

"Thank you for the update, Madame Crabbe." Voldemort took the offered pain relief potions she set on the table before him. He drank them down quickly as the Mediwitch retreated from his study. The others were repairing the damage to the central chamber and Severus was out acquiring the necessary personnel for Ms. Beaucourt's plan to be implemented. Peter would have to be disciplined, on principal. The lancing pain in his chest caused by his damaged ribs dwindled to a dull roar.

He turned his attention to the latest reports and troop movements. He would have to call another meeting with the Dementors. They had been merely raiding, when he desired slaughter. There was a rumor that Potter could kill them. Thus far, it was unsubstantiated. He should have asked the boy when he was here. Antonin Dolohov was due back in a few days. Penelope had been sent to rendezvous with him on her way to a new name and identity in Amercia.

Voldemort wondered what pressures he could bring to bear against the forces arrayed against him. The battle in the Ministry was now a political holding action. Scrimgeour's agenda had been halted and the situation was now a veritable quagmire. Dumbledore was licking his wounds. At the same time, his own forces had suffered their share of defeats. The problem at the moment was that no faction had forward momentum. It was a standstill. Ironically the only one making any progress appeared to be Potter, but he has no organization. Perhaps the current climate favored the solo operative with no fixed ties. It had been almost four decades since that description applied to him.

Creating and leading an organization can become a full time mistress. He saw how well his 'entity' had survived in his 'absence'. His Death Eaters scurried into the woodwork and tried to hide their service to him. Perhaps it was his own sense of mortality, either from the injuries or the knowledge that Potter had been a bit too close for comfort, but he wondered if his message could survive another 'absence'? Voldemort considered several ideas on how best to proceed.

A knock on the door interrupted his musings. "Enter." A tall, thin, and balding man in a traveling cloak entered and performed a deep bow to his Master.

"Welcome back Rookwood. Were you able to acquire the item I requested?"

He received the ornate wooden box proffered by his servant, as Augustus Rookwood's raspy voice replied, "There were no obstacles that time, patience and currency could not overcome, Milord. My contacts in Nice were able to procure it with very little questions. Mulicber is down in the holding cells performing the preliminary work on the captives. The witch is easily enough dominated. I assume this is for the other one?"

"Indeed it is. Excellent work. I may have another mission for you in the near future."

"I live to serve, Master." The Death Eater bowed and exited.

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"Release me, I can make it worth your while, non?" Daimen Mulciber listened impassively to the blonde witch coo. He could feel her aura pouring on her charm. Being a specialist in mind control, he took the opportunity to observe just how the Veela aura operates, under low lighting and revealing charms. The hair takes on an unnatural sheen. In the reduced light of the cell, he could actually see it glitter slightly. From his research, he knew that her scent would be changing and releasing thousands of pheromones into the surrounding air to assault his senses. The scent would be designed to heighten male arousal. Other areas of the young woman's body glittered as the aura attempted to draw his attention to breasts, lips, and eyes. He caught himself wetting his lips slightly, but clinically analyzing her power had a way of detaching him from the experience. Though he noted how the breasts firmed with nipples straining against fabric, the lips became fuller and formed a teasing pout and the pupils of the eyes became larger and more inviting.

The woman's voice dropped to a sultry whisper, "Maybe I liked to be chained up? Maybe I need a man to take me? We're all alone right now. There's nothing to stop you." She arched her body on the bed to indicate submission.

Mulciber chuckled at the display. They were not alone. Two female Death Eaters were outside with a scrying charm watching their entire exchange. The women would enter and stun him if he showed the first signs of falling for the Veela charm. The guard in the infirmary was proof that the Frenchwoman was not to be taken lightly. In his line of work, pure brutal honesty was often the most terrifying thing he could do to a prisoner. He gestured to the scorch mark on the door, "Or perhaps you would like to do that to my face? No I am afraid not. I am impressed that you are able to make a full avian transformation. Many halfbreeds cannot and for you being a quarter it is indeed noteworthy. You are an exceptional specimen. I shall enjoy breaking you and turning you into a servant of my Master. Now, this evening I will be taking hair, skin and blood samples. I will also be gauging your ability to resist the Imperius curse. You are adept at manipulating the male species, let us see if you can take what you so freely dish out. Would you like a bit of water before we begin?"

Fleur bit her lower lip. Aimee had betrayed her! Her head still hurt from the drugged wine and the man before her mocked her despite her best efforts.

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From a distance, the ethereal glow of the patroni shined like tiny points of light amongst a wave of darkness. Harry had used a second killer patronus after the first faded from view. It wasn't very taxing at all; nowhere near the exhaustion he had felt prior. Several of the aurors were down. Hearing pops to his left Harry spun with his wand an offensive spell on his lips, but stopped upon seeing the Minister and the surviving members of Delta command. It looked like they lost the photographer and one of the Minister's bodyguards. Rita was still there looking frightfully pale, which morbidly amused Harry. Up until now, he wasn't certain she had a soul.

"Figured over here was safer. They're afraid of you Potter. Can't say I blame them!" Scrimgeour said shivering visibly and casting his patronus. Harry could tell it was a dog of some kind, but was far too busy guiding Prongs to play the 'guess the patronus game'. The Minister raised his wand and magically enhanced his voice. "Everyone form here! Quickly!"

The pops of apparition could be heard as the cloud of Dementors shifted like enraged insects after prey. Harry noticed that everyone else was shaking and quivering, but he felt no different than normal. It was a far cry from the frightened boy who fainted in their presence nearly three years ago. The most interesting thing is instead of his mother's voice, he was hearing the voices of Susan, Bill, Dumbledore, The Order and the rest of the Weasleys condemning him for turning into a Dark Wizard. He had a new darkest fear, but their aura no longer affected him.

Harry turned and barked an order. "Everyone get inside that warehouse. We can evacuate from in there."

The Minister looked at him. "What are you playing at Harry? We'll fall back from here."



"I'm immune to them. If we lure them in, you can leave and I'll trap them inside and slaughter them."

"Right then, everyone inside. Leave the door open so they can follow us. Cast unbreakable charms on the windows and seal everything but the front door. Are you sure about this Harry? Okay, you heard him."

The group moved in under the cover a various patroni. Upon entering the warehouse, the aurors cast unbreakable charms and *colloportus* on everything they could find.

The Minister took an item out of his pocket, a small ivory bracelet. "Harry, this is a special portkey. Once you put it on you will need to say 'cancel' every minute to prevent the portkey from activating. Just because they can't affect you doesn't mean they can't kiss you. If you say emergency activate, it will trigger. You'll end up in a small cottage near Dover. The floo is connected to Auror Headquarters. Good luck!"

Harry accepted it and watched everyone depart and put it into his pocket. He didn't cast his patronus; instead he let the swirling mass flow into the room. The Dementors stopped moving and floated in the air. Two of them dragged a body of one of the kissed aurors towards him. A third one moved towards the body and breathed black mist into it.

The voice came out devoid of any emotion, "You are the one who can kill us."

Harry couldn't think of a justification for lying, so he merely nodded his head and said, "What of it? You're in league with Riddle and his Death Eaters."

"You are unnatural." It certainly was an ironic statement coming from a floating hellspawn.

"What do you mean?"

"The one you fight. He linked himself to us long ago, to prevent death from claiming him. The link was transferred to you when he attempted to kill you as a child. The ones you encountered years ago sensed

the wrongness about you and tried to consume you. They were wrong."

"Your aura doesn't affect me anymore. I'm not scared of any of you." Though Harry didn't like how many were floating around him. It made him nervous.

"Join us."

"What?"

"Let us strengthen the link. You are already able to draw from our strength. If you haven't already you will be able to call upon our powers. Perhaps, in time you will become one of us. We will join you in conquest. You will take us to larger feeding grounds. Let us grow stronger and you shall grow stronger."

Harry paled the thought of becoming a dementor. The idea was repugnant. Harry asked the question no one knew the answer to. "What are you?"

"Once we were the war mages of Lemuria, whom the Atlanteans defeated. Our souls were used to rebirth us. We were then used against our own people, but eventually we rebelled and destroyed our creators. Most of our kind perished with the destruction of Atlantis. The one you call Merlin tricked us and bound us to this land using blood magic. Only a few of our kind exist elsewhere in this world. If we make you strong enough you can break the magic, which binds us here and we will be free to roam the world for the first time in a thousand years."

Harry paced ignoring the Dementors around him. His mind whirled at the implications. It was disgusting on so many levels. In a small group he had felt the strain on his magic casting the powerful patronus, but tonight with so many around him he barely felt it. He began to wonder if the Power the Dark Lord Knows Not would be supplied to him by the Dementors. What kind of monster was Harry Potter?

"Are you all here tonight?"

"No, there is another nest elsewhere. This is the majority of our number. Will you join us and wield our power?"

Harry stared into the lifeless eyes of the auror propped up by the skeletal hands of two dementors. The eyes accused him. In them he saw the price of power, let the dementors free to consume souls and use that power to destroy Riddle. In his mind he saw images of whole cities filled lifeless husks with him turning into a dementor and joining in. He felt violated on a basic level.

He waved his wand at the large sliding door of the old warehouse.  
"Colloportus!"

"What are you doing?" The dead auror asked. Was it Harry's imagination or was there a hint of fear in it?

"I'll never become one of you! You may have been around for thousands of years, but that ends tonight! *Expecto Patronum!*" In the morning the muggles would falsely report this as a small earthquake measuring three point two on their Richter scale. Harry felt the ground tremble beneath his feet as a stag the size of a small dragon erupted from his wand. He heard the auror scream for the dementor controlling it as it and the two next to it became the first but not the last victims.

Harry watched as Dementors rebounded of unbreakable windows. Some started clawing at the wooden walls of the old warehouse trying to escape into the night. Others tried to pry the door Harry had sealed open. Perhaps the magic holding it would weaken as the Prongs began destroying more and more dementors.

Eventually, they turned towards him. Unable to perform their kiss, they slashed at him with bony claws as Harry backed into a corner and shielded himself with dragon hide gauntlets while transfiguring a chunk of wood into an axe similar to the one he had given to Hagrid. He tried disillusioning himself, but they could still sense him. Still the giant Prongs raged against the soul sucking monsters. His blows were moderately effective at keeping the clawed hands from reaching him. He banished debris to knock them backwards. Fortunately, the long dead mages did not consider finding weapons of their own. Prongs circled around him clearing the ones closest to him.

Scraped, bloodied and mostly beaten, Harry Potter bore sole witness to the destruction of most of the dementors still in existence. He sagged to the ground certain that he looked like he had just dove naked and head first into a rose bush.

"You look like you could use a hand, not to mention a healer." Rita's voice broke through the silence. He could see her in the faint moonlight coming in through the unbreakable windows. Apparently, Harry hadn't been the sole witness.

Harry's coughed and choked back some of the bile that had worked its way up into his throat. Accepting her hand, while feeling for signs of the Dark Mark on her he said dryly, "Here I thought all the soulsuckers were dead. Why did you stay?"

"Now Harry, that was uncalled for! I heard that your godfather was able to use his unregistered 'talent' to evade these things and I simply couldn't resist staying to see the showdown between Lord Potter and the Dementor Horde. I never knew how they communicated; in a way I wish I never found out."

"So you heard everything didn't you?" Harry wondered if he should obliviate her or have Scrimgeour do it. At least she didn't have the mark on her.

"I always wondered why there were so few dementors outside of England. Do you realize that we are probably the only two people, who know that little tidbit? So when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named tried to kill you, he transferred a link he created with them to you."

After pondering these things for a moment, Harry began rapidly putting these facts together. The blood magic his mother used to save him was probably derived from Merlin's magic used to trap the dementors in England. Somehow, the magic of Riddle's killing curse, the blood wards and Riddle's connection to the Dementors combine to reflect the killing curse and transfer both the dementor's link and the parseltongue into Harry. He suspected that both of those abilities were blood magic based.

"I guess that's pretty much the story. How much of this are you planning to write?"

Rita sighed dramatically, "My deal with the Minister says he gets to proofread and edit tonight events. I'll have to save it for your Unauthorized Biography, unless of course, we can work a deal for your Authorized Biography? I'd be willing to take a vow of silence about this fact in exchange for your exclusive rights? You're looking rather peaked right now so if you're thinking about obliterating me, I'd seriously consider another option. I am notoriously resistant to mental charms and one of the fastest at apparition you will ever see."

"How do you know you're resistant to mental charms?"

"Dear boy, I dated Gilderoy for three years coming out of school. Without going into details, let's just say I acquired immunity along the way, shall we. One of the biggest things I've held against you is that you ruined my complete and utter humiliation of him a few years back. I had a total exposition of him almost finished and then he goes and runs into you and ends up drawing with crayons in St. Mungo's. It's really hard to sell a publisher on printing that book. We're talking over a year of painstaking research down the drain, Harry. I had the first ten chapters written!"

Harry laughed at her shrill proclamation. "Sorry to disappoint you by not ending up a mental midget."

"Harry, are you frightened by what that thing said – that you could become a dementor?" He looked at her. If she was faking concern, she was very good at it. Then again, there was a rumor that Rita Skeeter could have sex with a man and fake his orgasm.

"I'd be a fool if I said I wasn't. I'll take you up on that vow. What's my cut of the biography?"

"Twenty percent," she answered perhaps a bit too quickly.

"Rita...."

"Fine twenty-five, the publisher's get fifty and I get the other twenty-five – useless sodding bastards!"

"How's your Occulmency?"

"Again notoriously resistant to mental charms, Harry. Why ever do you ask?"

"No reason. This can't get out. There's still another nest of dementors out there and if Riddle brings them into battle with him, I'll stand more of a chance against him. In fact, it would be a great help if you could play up how fatigued I looked and felt at the end of the fight. Anyway, if you swear to never write, speak of or imply my connection to the dementors, I'll let you write my authorized biography after Riddle is dead."

"Considering you look like you tried to take a shower with a mother kneasle and her litter, it won't be stretching the truth so much, but what happens if you die and not Riddle? Sorry Harry, you're a sweetheart, but this is business. A girls gotta make a living, you know?"

"If I die, do you really think he is going to let you write a biography about me?"

"Of course he would, it will be full of all these positively juicy lies about you. It'll probably take ten or twenty years, but eventually he'll want to rewrite history to paint himself in a better light for the next generation. You know what they say revision is so much better than just plain old vision! Honestly Harry, it's not about good and evil or right and wrong – it's about image. The sooner you learn that the better off you'll be."

"Fine! After me or Riddle snuff it, you can write my biography. If I do turn into one of those things, make sure they figure out how to cast the spell."

"What?" Rita looked confused.

"Tell someone to kill me. Now let's swear ourselves an oath."

Harry learned a surprising fact; her full name was Francine Amorita Skeeter. He also learned that he should never even in a jest refer to her as Francine. She went back outside and retrieved the camera from the Ministry photographer and snapped a quick shot of Harry with his face half in darkness and half illuminated by the moonlight.

The scratches and marks were clearly visible. His cloak was frayed and tattered.

"Was that really necessary?"

"If you want to play the young wizard, who just barely got out of this alive. Well, we best be going. Rufus is probably worried sick about you and nervous about what I am doing. Plus, I have an entire story to write and get approved in four hours! These things don't write themselves."

"So now that we have our little deal, how much do the publishers really take?"

She flashed him a smile that was both dazzling and predatory at the same time. "Never more than thirty percent, dear. Consider it a valuable lesson in doing business."

"Thanks Francine. Ow! Still bruised there! Should we apparate back or do you want to portkey to his cottage and floo from there? It's kind of a long way to London."

"Let's use the portkey. I wouldn't miss a chance to see Rufus's little hideaway. You never know when I might need to use Scrimgeour's secret lovenest in a story."

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"Good morning, Susan. Were you able to sleep last night?" Dumbledore ignored the loudly snoring form of Hermione Granger on the other bed. Fortunately, the elves had cleared away both the containers and the bottles of alcohol from the room.

"Some, Headmaster. I kept waking up last night, like I had a nervous energy. What can I do for you?"

"Having escaped the clutches of our resident healer, I am headed back to headquarters to speak with Harry. I was hoping you would accompany me." Albus held the breathing mask to his mouth to take some breaths. He obviously shouldn't be up, but stubbornness seemed to be a common affliction amongst magical people. One of

his eyes covered by a patch. She thought of asking about his health, but opted against it.

"Can you give me about fifteen minutes to clean myself up?"

"Certainly. Take all the time you need." Dumbledore retreated from the room casting one final suspicious glance at the sleeping Gryffindor.

Susan waited for a moment and then headed off to the shower. Her limp was much more noticeable today. Last night's excitement hadn't done her rehabilitation any favors. As she cleaned herself, she wondered how she was going to deal with her fiancé. The weak bond between them wasn't something that could be thrown off in anger. She reckoned in her position, Ginny Weasley would use the attraction against him and seduce him out of his anger. Hermione would probably use some cool logic with big words to demonstrate her vastly superior position and bludgeon him into submission. Hannah would just snog him until he forgot what the argument was about. She didn't even want to think about Megan Jones's tactics of 'Oral solves everything.' Then again, Megan was enormously popular and easy to get along with, although that reputation was going to follow her after school. Millie Bulstrode would place him into a headlock until either he gave up or passed out. Back to the subject at hand, what exactly was she going to do about Hannah anyway? This wasn't exactly one of those tiny things that could be easily forgiven?

Pulling a dress out of her wardrobe, she slid it on. She shuddered at the thought of trying to get into pants at the moment and the pain it would cause. The dress was one of her favorite sundresses. Normally, she would take the time to dry and plait her hair by hand. This was out of habit because up until now she had been underaged. One very self-satisfying wave of her wand and her hair dried. She was still trying to get the hang of the spell that would plait her hair the way she liked it, so she settled for a long ponytail. She wouldn't be any of those girls. She would handle Harry as plain old Susan Bones.

Muttering to herself, "Course it would help if I knew just how I handle these things."



Leaving Hermione to her slumber she exited the room. Fortunately, these dorms were the first set and there was only eight short steps into the Ravenclaw common room. Her attention was immediately drawn to the Headmaster standing in the middle of the room. The three current heads of house were practically circling him with unreadable looks on their face. A copy of the Daily Prophet floated in the air in front of him.

"Albus, you have to talk some sense into Potter. His escapades are getting out of control!"

"Agreed Minerva, however I do believe that I am not the best person to address this with him. Ah Susan, it appears we need to take in a bit of light reading before we head out."

Susan moved to where she could see the front page. On the front page was Harry looking worse for wear with a grim expression on his half illuminated face.

The headline proclaimed in large bold type – 'Potter and Minister Lead Massive Counterstrike Against Dark Forces!' Susan shook her head and blew her bangs out of the way in frustration as she began scanning the story.

*Rita Skeeter reporting. Your fearless finder of facts found herself in unexpected peril in the predawn hours. Accompanied by over a score of aurors, including the Minister and the Head of Magical Law Enforcement, as well as a crack team of Cursebreaker's protected by the one and only Harry Potter, we set off in search of the hidden sanctuaries of the Death Eaters.*

*"We had reliable information on the location of several of their hideouts. Critics of my administration are always quick to falsely accuse me of not trying to gather enough intelligence and being slow to respond. I say that is complete and utter rubbish! Tonight's results speak for themselves. We are winning this war. We are capable of bringing the battle to our enemy and we will be victorious!" Minister Scrimgeour responded forcefully after debriefing the troops.*

*And what results you ask? Only the capture of seven Death Eaters, the death of three more and the utter devastation of the traitorous*

*Dementors – formerly of Azkaban. Minister Scrimgeour was unable to comment on the reports that several rumored hostages had also been freed only to say that there would be more good news as soon as the parties involved could be contacted.*

*From my vantage point on the front lines of the War Against Darkness at a country manor in Essex, I witnessed The Boy Who Lived outfly and outperform a fleeing Death Eater who turned out to be none other than ex-Bulgarian Quidditch star Piotr Levski. The chaser on his firebolt was no match for Harry Potter's incredible death defying acrobatics. The harrowing chase ended as the Bulgarian tried to fly into a heavily wooded area against the person already being considered for a position on the English National Team. The conclusion – Lord Potter emerged without a scratch and the forensics team carted Levski away in a body bag.*

*When asked about the death Lord Potter was stoic beyond his sixteen years. "Rita, he was a Death Eater. I'm not happy that he died, but I am not going to lose any sleep over it. He worked for the same man that has been trying to kill me since I was a baby. He made his choice, when he took Tom Riddle's fancy tattoo. If he hadn't already killed someone, he was going to."*

*I had thought it was simply tough talk from the boyish Lord trying to establish himself as a player in Magical Britain, but I was corrected by William Weasley, leader of the Gringott's Cursebreakers attached to the assault force. He is the brother of the recently deceased Percival and George Weasley. His youngest brother Roland is one of Harry's closest friends.*

*"Make no mistake, Ms. Skeeter, Harry is a tremendously powerful wizard. Underestimate him at your own risk."*

*With such statements of seemingly false bravado, we left our first target and arrived at the second target only to find it overrun with all the Dementors of Azkaban. Those of you who have ever been in the presence of a single one of those foul creatures can tell you it is an experience most won't wish to share. Overhead, at one point blotting out the half moon were hundreds of them. Both the Minister and Lord Potter rallied the troops as I watched in amazement at the patronus*

*belonging to Lord Potter kill several dementors. That's right faithful readers believe the rumors we reported on over a week ago in this very column, Harry Potter can kill a dementor! The stag patronus, a magical representation of his father, sources close to Lord Potter informed me, didn't merely drive them off. It reduced them to smoldering ashes! See Picture on Page 3 of Potter's Killer Patronus in Action! See Picture on Page 5 of Potter taking to the sky against Death Eater Levski! See Potter and Minister Scrimgeour on Page 2 congratulating Director Ada Dawson for a well executed and successful raid.*

*Seeking to minimize any losses, the Minister and Potter led our group into a nearby warehouse, where they laid a clever trap for the Minions of Darkness. The brave aurors and cursebreakers sealed all the exits except for the main entrance. Like moths to a flame the Dementors entered the building. Everyone save Lord Potter retreated with Portkeys. Shirking my own safety, I apparated outside and watched the epic confrontation unfold.*

*Lord Potter, seemingly immune to their debilitating aura of despair, sealed the entrance and began destroying the foul wraiths with his Killer Patronus. History speaks of such legendary events like the fall of Atlantis and the Wizard King Beowulf triumphing against Grendel's troll army. This reporter stood in awe and watched a wizard only considered a man through a legality unleash a magic that might only be rivaled by Merlin himself.*

*The monsters must have realized that this was their end. They started trying to physically assault Lord Potter. He was backed into a corner with only his wand and a conjured axe to defend himself like some warrior of folktales, as his patronus raged like a wild beast through their ranks. Seconds turned to minutes as I watched the brave lad fight for not just his life, but his very soul! Never before and hopefully never again, will I witness something so glorious and terrifying at the same time.*

*When it was done, our hero stood on unsteady legs, bleeding from numerous wounds, his clothing frayed and torn. The air was thick with the disgusting smoke the creatures emitted in their death throes. Harry used my arm for support. The legendary warrior had suddenly*

*vanished and only a brave but weary young man remained. He was physically, magically and emotionally exhausted. I'm not ashamed to admit it touched a maternal chord in my heart as I helped him leave the warehouse. Despite the warmth of the summer night, I could feel him shivering.*

*His voice was barely rose above a whisper as he said, "It's done. I don't think I could fight those things again. I'm glad they're gone."*

*I complimented him on his victory as we prepared to Portkey back to the Ministry, but he was gracious to all those involved. "Rita, this was a team effort. The Minister, the Director, the Aurors, the Cursebreakers and even you, Rita were all part of the team."*

*"*

*The Minister echoed Lord Potter's sentiments, proclaiming a monumental victory against the enemies of the Ministry. He said that the prisoners and the deceased were all foreign born nationals. "The Witches and Wizards of Magical Britain sent a message today. That message was do not come to our country with the intent of making war on us. Our enemy no longer finds willing recruits in England and instead imports the scum of Europe to do his fighting. Let the word go forth to those who would consider coming here to fight under our enemies banner, we will not tolerate you. We will find you. We will bring you to justice."*

*Minister Scrimgeour went on to imply that foreign born fighters should expect to find mercy in short supply here in Britain. He is considering asking the Wizengamot for new restrictions on persons seeking to enter our country.*

Susan looked up from the paper. All the adults in the room had been watching her face as she read the story. If she had a moment to look at herself, she probably would have been amused by the shade of color on her face. "Here I was worried he would do something sensible, like go home and cool off. No! He goes and does something like this! You might want to talk with him first, Headmaster because he isn't going to like what I have to say to him right now! Of all the stupid idiotic..."

"You should calm yourself Susan. Ms. Skeeter does have a way of taking artistic license with her work. Why don't we give Harry the benefit of the doubt for the moment and hear his side of things. Come, why don't we walk outside and get some morning air before I have Fawkes transport us to Mr. Potter?"

They walked slowly in relative silence the portraits watched the strange pair pass. Stopping periodically for the headmaster to breathe from his mask. Reaching the open air outside the main gate. Dumbledore asked her, "As a result of her actions Ms. Abbott will be forfeiting her prefect's badge. I would like you to consider taking over."

"Thank you sir, but I don't think so. Harry is my number one priority. I don't think I would be able to perform my duties to the level that would make either of us happy. Megan or Sally-Ann would be a better choice. Is that all that is going to happen to Hannah?"

"In a sense I am both disappointed and relieved at your decision. Harry is indeed fortunate to have your support. I shall approach Ms. Jones next. To answer your question, both of Peter's daughters will be operating under various restrictions if they wish to continue their education here. Their tutoring of others in Occulmency and Legilmency will be monitored by staff and they will be swearing oaths to prohibit them from using their skills on an unwilling subject for as long as they remain at Hogwarts. They will be assisting Nurse Pomfrey in any recovery or rehabilitation of Ms. Weasley and their participation in any and all extracurricular activities will be subject to my approval."

"How is Ginny? Harry will want to know." Susan thought of the Weasleys. The first thing that popped into her head was that Ron would probably be unhappy being called Roland in Rita's article.

"She is recovering. The oath damaged her magically and it may be months before she will be able to perform at her previous level. More disturbing is that she had a seizure indicating some neurological damage that will take longer to heal if in fact it will heal. We are sending her to St. Mungo's for more in depth testing and should know more within a week."

Susan absorbed all this. She wouldn't say that she cared about Ginny's welfare, but she knew Harry would. Mostly out of guilt that he made her swear the oath to begin with. "Is Hannah okay?"

"She is recovering. Mr. Potter was quite thorough in his demolition of her mental defenses. She should be able to get her barriers repaired in time for the start of the school year, if she applies herself. I ask that when you visit her, you be supportive rather than combative. She is in a fragile emotional state and probably needs a friend rather than an accuser. I hate to place you in such an awkward position, but you may need to be the one that brokers a truce between your fiancé and the Abbott family. I already have to keep Remus and Peter Abbott away from each other."

"Right. One problem at a time. I need to salvage my relationship with Harry first. I know we aren't planning on the wedding until the holidays at the earliest, but I think it would be best if we made use of the suites of rooms for visitors and married students. I can't very well give him support from the Hufflepuff dormitories."

"Indeed. I agree that the two of you need time together. I will have to expend some political clout with the Board of Governors, but I believe that what you propose is in everyone's best interest. Are you now in the proper frame of mind to speak with him? My ears may be quite old and I am not exactly certain what I heard you mumbling, but I don't think Harry would appreciate what you intended to do with you cane?"

"I'm ready as I am going to be. I promise that I won't do that thing with the cane unless he truly deserves it. Sir, I think it is best that only I go for the moment. I need to speak with him alone, first. If the two of us go there, it will seem like we are teaming up against him. Have Fawkes bring my pensieve and I'll send it back with the memories Harry wants to share." Susan replied with a bit of a blush that the Headmaster had heard her plans for clubbing Harry with her cane until either it or his thick skull broke first.

"Very good. I understand your logic completely. Fawkes! Please take Miss Bones to Mr. Potter. I shall return to my office to await my recapture by our resident healer."

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Emmeline Vance sat at her breakfast table taking in the morning paper. She was certain that there would be an Order meeting soon with so much happening. She hoped Bill and Harry were really okay with their encounter with the Dementors. Things were heating up. She felt like somewhere, a damn was about to burst. It scared her. The Order was in poor shape. Many of their best fighters were gone or injured. There was much to worry about.

Aristotle, Hestia Jones's owl landed on the table startled her. She took the letter off the leg and tossed him a treat. The older witch and Emmeline got along like sisters. She was shocked that Hestia had cut short her vacation.

*E,*

*Cut short the trip to Greece. Couldn't stay away. What in Merlin's name is going on? Meet me at the usual. I need an update, badly.*

*H*

Emmeline finished dressing in a hurry. Hestia would be waiting at the coffee shop. She concentrated on her destination and apparated to the alley behind the little café.

*"Stupefy!"*

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The healer on station at Auror Headquarters had healed Harry's scrapes. They looked much worse than they actually were. When Rufus had asked to see the memory, Harry had provided only the portion from the time he unleashed his patronus. There were limits to the people that Harry was going to trust with this information. He needed to speak with Dumbledore, but that could wait. Not nearly as tired as Rita's story would make him out to be, but still quite knackered. Harry, escorted by Bill returned to his house. Sturgis had gone to sleep and Mr. Diggle was there. Bill put a glamour over Harry and the Order member never saw Harry's shredded clothing and signs of magical healing.

Harry went up to the library and spoke with Bill for a time before begging off to sleep. He didn't immediately sleep, but summoned the echo of his godfather to the frame in his sanctuary room where they had a long discussion about the minds of females. Far too early for Harry's liking, Dobby woke him up.

"Harry Potter's Suzy is here to see you. Miss Suzy can't open the bedroom door to your private room."

Harry dressed quickly. His anger at her had turned to numbness. He didn't know what to feel at the moment. He toyed with the idea of simply telling Dobby that he was unavailable for visitors today. Deciding that it would go over as well as a return engagement of the Delores Umbridge educational experience, he finished dressing and opened the door. He could feel the nervous energy radiating from Susan. She hadn't been working on her Occulmency. He could see the copy of the Daily Prophet clutched in her hand.

"Good morning, something I can do for you?" Harry said attempting but failing to sound casual.

Susan stood and moved towards him. Harry suspected his cheek was about to start hurting. 'Well Susan, considering I had dementors clawing at me let's see what Harry Potter's Suzy is made of? Give me your best shot.' He didn't want to admit it, but old Suzy was pretty when she was angry. By all indications, she was also pretty angry.

She stopped a foot in front of him and stared in his eyes. At five foot six, she was only an inch or two shorter than he was and since she was in shoes and he was not, they looked at each other straight in the other's eyes. The staring contest went on for a good thirty seconds before Susan opened her mouth.

"I'm not apologizing for stopping you last night. You were wrong to go at Hannah like that and you were out of control. You're not going to apologize for trying to avenge your friend. It's what you do. It's who you are. I get it. I wanted to come over here and crack your thick skull open after I read about your little trip around the English countryside, but then I realized you went and got twenty aurors to come with you. So, I can't really be too upset about that, can I? Wait don't say anything, I'm not finished yet. What matters is what we do now. I've



accepted the fact that you and probably me are going to end up killing more people before this war is through. It isn't open season on anyone who gets on your nerves. Mr. Abbott stepped way over the line, but going after him isn't going to solve anything. Let Dumbledore handle him. Don't kill anyone that you don't have to. Don't lose yourself. Don't go dark. Don't become a monster. Stay in the light and I swear, I'll never leave you."

Susan wasn't sure how her speech was going to be received. She was prepared for anything from him laughing at her and mocking her up to a 'colloportus the door' level tantrum. Instead she felt a sharp sensation of anguish come through their bond and suddenly Harry's arms were around her and his head was buried in her neck. It was selfish of her to savor the power of his hug. He clutched at her as if she was the most important thing in the world. There were no tears, but only some kind of raw need for contact with her. It was both empowering and confusing at the same time.

"Do you want to talk about it? Was it about the battle?" Harry only tightened his grip. It took a few minutes before she could get him untangled from her. She wondered what she had said that broke through his defenses so quickly. "Fawkes is bringing my pensieve. Whatever it is. It can't be that bad? Dumbledore asked that you give him the memory of your encounter with Riddle as well."

Harry sighed and removed the memories as the phoenix arrived seeming slightly less hostile than in recent visits, "I'd like to believe that, but I know the truth." Harry knew that the only one in Britain with enough knowledge of blood wards and magical connections to understand would need to see his memories. If there was a way to sever his connection with the dementors, they would have to start somewhere.

"Fawkes, would you please take my pensieve to Dumbledore."

Harry looked at her, "Aren't you going to watch it?"

"You're more important. That can wait." She pulled Harry back to her. She'd watch it some other time. The world needed Harry, but most importantly Harry needed her. At that moment, nothing else in the world mattered.

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"Mulciber, how long before the last witch is broken? I wish to proceed as soon as possible."

"The younger witch is tenacious, but her willpower is fading. I anticipate success within twenty-four to forty-eight hours. I have done all I can with the Veela. She is pliable. The rest hinges on how well she responds to Rookwood's little present."

Voldemort allowed his eyes to narrow, the crumpled morning paper in front of him parts of it scorched by his angry magic. "Return to your labors. I will join you downstairs. You are quite skilled at your profession, but perhaps I have a trick or two you haven't seen before. Our combined efforts can speed the process along. I will be along momentarily. The sooner she is broken, the sooner we can teach these fools the folly of angering me."

Recognizing the anger emanating from his Master, Daimen Mulciber retreated back to the cells and his task of preparing the prisoners. A simple Imperius curse could control someone very effectively provided the caster maintained close proximity to the victim. For greater distance and extended periods of control, there were certain potions and procedures requiring meticulous skill and attention to the tiniest detail. Those were the things he prided himself on. He looked forward to seeing what skills the Dark Lord had to offer.

He opened the cell door and regarded the bound witch in front of him. "Hello again, Emmeline. May I call you Emmy? It's such a long and traditional name. I'd like us to become very good friends. People don't usually like me at first, but after a time they come around and want to be my friend. Hestia is already my close friend. She wants you to be my friend as well. She told me how to get in touch with you. Later, we'll bring her in and let you speak with her. She'll tell you how happy she is now. Soon we will all be such good friends. I have a special guest coming to see you. You won't want to be his friend. You will want to serve him, like we all do."

Her screams of fear and terror as the door opened were like a well-performed opera to his ears as he set about his work. After all just

ask the politicians, getting people to see the world the way you want them to takes hard work and a willingness to persevere.

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## Chapter 26 – Black Widow Rush

“Move faster! Your wand work is too slow, and too sloppy! A trained enemy would crush you without a second thought! This is a *basic* Auror exercise.”

Neville Longbottom stood panting for breath in the middle of the Room of Requirement. There was a thick sheen of sweat on his body and the shattered remains of targets everywhere. If magic had a smell, the air would have been thick with it.

Coedus circled his great, great, great grand nephew, correcting his stance and wand position. “Neville, you came to me seeking greatness. You must be willing to suffer for it. You are steadily improving, but already you should realize how far you have to go. In this room there will be no illusions between us. You want me to teach you what it is like to kill. When you step outside this room, you will need to return to your meek shell. Let your enemies underestimate you. Let them mock you. Give them no reason to be wary of you. When the time is right strike them down. If you find yourself in a real fight, expect no quarter and give no quarter. If they throw a stunner at you, you respond with a severing charm. If they try to body bind you, blast them.”

“Yes Uncle.” The young man answered to his Vampire ancestor.

“Should you learn nothing else from me, learn this – everyone in this world is dangerous. They are either dangerous to themselves or they are dangerous to others. You are either predator or prey. Look into your soul, Neville. Which do you choose to be?” Coedus asked.

Neville met Coedus’ gaze and let him see his determination, “I’ll reset the targets, Uncle. I will be faster this time,” Neville said with determination. With a few wand motions, the broken targets began to reassemble themselves.

Coedus nodded his head in approval. He was actually pleased that Dumbledore had chosen him for the Potions position instead of the Defense against the Dark Arts. The Headmaster had negotiated with some injured ex-Auror name Dawlish to take that position. He gathered that Neville was slightly better than average for what this

school had to offer. If that were indeed the case, teaching Defense would have been a mind-numbing labor guaranteed to send him on a killing spree. He wasn't sure his standards could be lowered that far.

He watched his distant relative begin the exercise anew as he considered his interview with the Ministry's Potion Masters. Their disdain for him as a Dark Creature showed, but he sufficiently impressed them with his knowledge of Potions. He was granted a probationary teaching certificate. His status would be judged in part by the success or failure of his first year of students.

Students of Hogwarts had always hated Potions, mainly because of the Death Eater that taught it. Coedus would give them a new reason to hate Potions. He had existed this long because he was a survivor. There would be no haven among the Clans until this war was over. Now his survival depended on teaching Potions to students less than one tenth of his age. They would learn or they would suffer.

Summoning the little magic still allowed to him, he cast a wandless banishing spell striking Neville, tossing him into the air. He crossed the room and stood over Neville. "Always expect your targets to fight back. Now, I will change into my wolf form. You will try to hit me with a stunner, but I expect that you'll fail. With enough work, you may one day be able to hit me in my bat form; that day will be a long time in coming. On your feet boy!"

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"I hope you have enjoyed your accommodations, Ms. Delacour?" Lord Voldemort looked on as the young Frenchwoman was brought before him. He felt the slight pull of her allure, as did Snape who was standing next to him. The only others present in the chamber were five female Death Eaters, Mulciber and his two new 'converts.' He knew both men were strong enough to resist the allure emanating from the captive.

"Your man could not break me. You will not succeed either!"

"Oh my poor disillusioned little girl, you were under the impression that we were trying to break you. No, the best we can hope for is to

‘soften’ you a bit. I had one of my servants travel to the continent. He brought us back a gift. Would you like to see it?”

Sensing no answer was forthcoming from the part-Veela; Voldemort opened the wooden box and withdrew a vial containing a swirling potion. It had a rather unique coloration, mostly a cream color with swirls of emerald green flowing almost as if alive. He savored the look of horrific recognition crossing the woman’s eyes. With a strength born of desperation, she shoved the two females restraining her and transformed into her avian form. He dissipated the fireball with ease as Snape petrified her.

“Severus, I do believe she recognizes the concoction. Here I was wondering if she was ignorant of her heritage. Since you *can* fully transform, you might be able to survive the ‘Black Widow Rush.’ If not, it means little to me. Now, I am going to compel you to drink this. Mulciber told me of your ability to throw off his curse after but a minute. Mine should last long enough for you to consume the potion. In six hours, when your violent urges begin to peak, I am going to send you back to your little friends at their secret headquarters. Severus and these two lovely ladies will be along to clean up whatever you haven’t mauled.”

Frozen in terror Fleur could only watch, as the vial was unstoppered. Her kin back in France had long ago sworn off using this potion. It was rumored that some of the other flocks elsewhere in Europe would still use it. ‘The Rush’ all but guaranteed a successful mating and magical offspring. Unfortunately, it also all but guaranteed that she would fly into a homicidal rage, a rage that would be focused on anyone she was mating with. She felt the euphoria of Imperio consume her as she was released. Obediently, she returned to her human form and drank the sweet elixir. Part of her knew it was wrong; the same part knew the potion killed over half of the part-Veelas that tried it.

Sadly, that part of Fleur was not in control as she emptied the vial and was led back to her cell. The Dark Lord continued to stay near, reinforcing his control to prevent her from vomiting the brew. He left after an hour, knowing the potion was now dispersed in her system. Fleur attempted to vomit, knowing it was now futile, but hoping

anyway. All five of the females remained outside to guard her. For the next hour she felt no different and had begun to hope that she had somehow defied the odds. It was during the second hour that those hopes were dashed as she alternated between chills, cramps and hot flashes as her body prepared for breeding. She noticed that she was involuntarily glowing.

Fleur tried the mental exercises that her mother and grandmother had taught her as she approached puberty. These exercises had allowed her to control the release of her allure. When puberty finally hit, she had been pulled out of school, sequestered in a wing of the house with no male contact for over two months as she learned to master her abilities.

Focusing her willpower, she concentrated. Years ago, it had been like trying to grasp the wind. Now it was like trying to stand against a vortex. She fought for the next hour, her face a mask of determination. She began to feel the debilitating effects of the elixir on her mind. It attacked the pleasure centers of her brain inducing euphoria and sapping her resistance. She tried to fight this with all her talent and skill, but it felt so warm and nice.

She dared open her eyes to gauge her progress sometime in the third hour. The evil bitches had dimmed the lighting in her cell! The only illumination was coming from her body as her aura surged like never before. Her breath caught in her own throat as she glared at her reflection in the mirror. She was magnificent! The battle was over. Her struggles ceased, as she gave into the surge of pleasures trickling through her body and watched her radiance grow beyond her wildest fantasies. It was power like she had never felt before. She allowed her own hands the honor of touching such ethereal beauty. It was pleasant for now, but soon she would need more, so very much more.

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The afterglow was wonderful; Harry was drowsing next to her while Susan felt some measure of guilt at how greedily she sucked up the comfort from having him pressed up against her. It was only after they had 'physically' made up, that they started the process of

‘emotionally’ making up. Harry had told her about the Dementors, their horrific offer and his greatest fear of turning into one of them. She now knew why her speech had affected him so. Was it shameful that she didn’t regret saying it to him? Had she not, they would still probably be yelling at each other. Instead the breach between them had been bridged. Was Hermione was right, was being Harry’s consort going to be a constant battle?

In telling her about his connection to the Dementors, Harry had given her the ultimate weapon in their relationship. Was it an expression of naïveté or trust? Susan recalled all the ‘girl talk’ in the dormitories, when the others would speak of their boyfriends. Some joked about having ‘the goods’ on ‘their boys.’ One of the older seventh years had found out her ‘man’ had strayed and had been begging for her forgiveness. Their arguments were comical in a sad way. Whenever Rebecca grew tired of his mouth, she mentioned that he could always go crawling back to that Slytherin whore and Kyle would clam up. The argument was over; he had lost.

She now had ‘the goods’ on Harry, but she was certain somehow that she couldn’t ever use it like Rebecca used it. Harry wasn’t like Kyle. *‘Hermione is wrong! It doesn’t have to be a constant battle.’* Reflexively she pulled Harry closer to her as she scolded herself for even following that train of thought. His eyes drifted open and he stared at her only half awake.

“Everything okay?” Harry asked drowsily.

Susan knew that she was probably scowling and flush with anger. How to answer him? “Just wishing that our fights were about stupid stuff like you forgetting to give me flowers or some such crap. Instead, we get to fight about things like getting injured in battles and how much Dark Magic is too much. From what you told me, you never had a childhood and mine ended the night my family was murdered. We can’t afford to be childish and petty with each other, can we?”

“No, I guess not. If you want, I can pencil into my calendar to forget the flowers every now and then? Give us something else to talk about?”



She allowed a smile to cross her face as her hand drifted downward and smacked him on his rump, "What a sweet gesture for you to make!"

"It's the 'giver' in me." Harry said, smiling briefly before darkening his expression. "Seriously, there's you, there's me and then there is 'us'. 'Us' has to be more important than everything else. I don't know if it can work otherwise. You and especially me need to remember that. Maybe that can be our signal to each other to calm down, just look at the other and say, 'remember us.' How's that sound?"

Susan bit her lip to fight back her tears as she rolled into him and wrapped her other arm around him, silently cursing him once again for saying something that melted her so completely. She touched her forehead to his and whispered, "It sounds brilliant!"

After a few minutes of kissing, Harry reluctantly pulled back. "Are you staying here tonight, or do you have to go back?"

"Madame Pomfrey wants me to let her work on my ankle, so I guess I need to go back. How about you? Come back with me?"

"Not yet. I have to meet with Rufus for a brief 'show of solidarity'. Cleftskull has been trying to get us down to the bank to witness an official apology for what happened. I guess their way of making amends is executing the goblin that panicked, activating the gargoyles. They'd like it if we attended. I kind of guessed that it wouldn't be your thing, but Rufus says I need to go to. Strength and cruelty seem to appeal to goblins."

Susan shuddered at the thought of attending an execution, even a goblin one. It sounded so barbaric. "I think I'll go to therapy instead. I also need to give Hannah the reaming she so richly deserves and then figure out if our friendship can be salvaged."

"Don't expect me to be so charitable," Harry replied. "I won't try to influence you, but don't expect me to be all warm and friendly around any of the Abbotts. I know you're as close to them as I am to the Weasleys."

"I know," Susan countered. "I won't try to force you into conversations with either Hannah or Chelsea if you won't try to make me play nice with Ginny."

"Hey it's the lovebirds!" Harry looked up to see the echo of Sirius Black walk into the picture frame in the sanctuary, a brandy snifter and a lit cigar in his hands. "Albus 'they- call-me-Lefty' Dumbledore is waiting for you downstairs and is requesting to speak with you."

Harry sighed and slid out of her embrace. As he started sliding his clothes back on he turned back to Susan and said, "I'll probably stay here tonight. I really don't feel like facing everyone in the castle. Tell Hermione and Ron that I'm okay and I'll be back there tomorrow. Sirius, tell him to come up to the library. Might as well get this over with."

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Harry found Dumbledore waiting patiently for him in the kitchen talking with Sturgis Podmore. The old man kept his breathing mask clutched in his remaining hand. "Good morning Harry. It is good to see you in such good spirits," Dumbledore wheezed. "When I viewed you memories, I was concerned for you. Sturgis, would you excuse us?"

"Sturgis, wait. Before you go, I wanted to try something," Harry said.

The hamster Animagus looked at him and shook his head. "Look Harry, I don't know what progress you think you've made on becoming an Animagus, but it doesn't happen just like that," Podmore said, snapping his fingers softly.

Harry smiled and turned to Dumbledore. "I was thinking about that whole learning-by-doing thing, could you be ready with the spell to force an Animagus out of his form?"

"Harry, are you certain you wish to try this now?"

"Yes, Professor. I should do it while it is still fresh in my head. Now is pretty much as good a time as any." Harry's reply further confused Sturgis.

Dumbledore nodded raising an eyebrow as Harry began to concentrate on the feelings and the sensations he had while in control of Wormtail. Everything Sturgis had told him to this point said the first full transformation was always painful. It was that reason that most students of the art practiced the partial transformations to prepare themselves for their body's reorganization.

It was much like the feeling of trying to hammer the proverbial square peg into a round hole. Much like conjuration, there is a threshold point that has to be pushed past before the transfiguration could proceed. Harry had no idea what his form could be so instead of picturing the actual form; he chose to picture the cupboard under the stair as a barrier between him and his transformation. His form was waiting for him on the other side of the locked door. Inside the confines of his mind, he flexed his magic against the door, causing it to strain.

Gathering his magic as a battering ram, Harry felt the door straining under his assault. The door was *his* threshold. The same draining feeling when he cast his Patronus overcame him. He could do this. He would do this. He will – break through. A tingling sensation washed over his skin and there was something happening to his face; he didn't dare open his eyes. *'Just keep going. Don't stop!'*

Opening his eyes he saw the world from a different standpoint. He was much shorter. For one horrific moment he thought he was a rat, just like Wormtail, until he stretched his left wing. Wings! He had wings! They were black like his hair. He beat them experimentally and managed to hover for a second, letting out a squawk of glee. He made his maiden flight from the floor to the kitchen table and strutted around the surface.

"I'd have never believed it, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes," Podmore sighed.

"Indeed. Well done, Harry," Dumbledore gasped and took a quick breath from his mask. "Perhaps your new raven form is an extension of your skill on a broom? There is a theory that the animal is a reflection of your personality and I must confess to reminding Minerva when she is being – shall we say, catty. Naturally, she reminds me that I have in fact become an old goat."

Harry leapt off the table half-falling and half-flapping back down to the floor and reveled in the freedom of his new form. He felt exhausted though. In hindsight, he probably should have waited another day or two before attempting this change. He felt cold. He could sense warmth nearby. 'Concentrate on the warmth! Let the warmth flow back to you.'

In the haze, Harry heard Sturgis sputter, "Albus? What's going on? What is this? It feel's like there's a Dementor in the room. Do you feel it getting colder?"

Harry heard Dumbledore utter a spell and he was violently tossed back into real body. He could still feel the traces of warmth. It had been coming from Sturgis and Dumbledore!

"Sturgis. Please leave us."

Harry watched as the Order member headed up the steps. Dumbledore cast privacy wards and took several more breaths from his magical device. "Harry, in your avian form you were able to simulate the effects of a Dementor. Until we can better understand this connection, I would ask that you refrain from transforming again without the presence of Minerva or myself. We need to examine this phenomenon under controlled conditions. Try once more, but this time try to avoid triggering the Dementor effect."

Harry transformed once again. It took far less power this time and he consciously avoided trying to draw the warmth towards him. It was there and he could sense it. Nervously, he changed back to his human form and tried to sense the same feeling of warmth. Thankfully, he could not.

"We will experiment more, but for the moment, we have more important matters to discuss. Let us start with your encounter last night with Tom."

Harry took a glass and filled it with juice from the pitcher as he sat down. The two of them began to discuss the events of last night.

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“Harry, if you don’t mind me saying, you are a bit distracted today. The Prophet article was a big success! Something on your mind?”

Harry fell in step next to the Minister of Magic. They were taking a ‘Walking Tour’ of Diagon Alley. The Minister had two new bodyguards. The two from last night were among the casualties. They looked at Harry uncertainly, most likely wondering how much of the article was to be believed. Six other Aurors were attempting to follow them and look inconspicuous. He doubted they would fool even the most casual of observers. Harry had stopped in front of the closed storefront of Fred and George’s shop. The sign on the door promised that the store would open again. He conjured three flowers and set them at the base of the door. They wouldn’t last but a few hours, but somehow it seemed fitting. He ignored the flash of the camera. Rita was nowhere to be found today.

“Honestly, I just want to get this whole thing with the Goblins over with. Killing in battle is one thing, but execution is another. They don’t want me to do it do they?”

Rufus Scrimgeour looked thoughtfully, “I hadn’t thought to ask. They probably would if you wanted. It could be good for your image? I see that the idea doesn’t really appeal to you.”

“No, not particularly. Where’s Rita? I figured she’d be all over this.” Harry said looking for a change of subject.

“I’m guessing she’s still asleep. She barely made her deadline for her story. You should consider yourself fortunate; a day without Rita is a day for celebration. Spend enough time around the Wizengamot and you’ll know what I am talking about.”

They stopped along the way as the Minister greeted several individuals. Harry tried to be polite but brief to the people that approached them. The only person Harry actually sought out was the healer he recognized from St. Mungo’s. She was seated at Fortescue’s; eating lunch with what must be her two boys. Both boys looked up at him in surprise.

“Healer Isaacs, it is good to see you again. I wanted to thank you for saving Susan’s foot.”

The healer smiled warmly at him ignoring her children's gasps of astonishment. "How is she doing?"

"She's still limping badly and I've already heard a few complaints about physical therapy, but it's much better than the alternative."

Harry noticed one of the boys tugging at her sleeve. She turned and looked at the younger of the two. "Mr. Potter, these are my two boys, Perry and Jerome. Perry will be attending Hogwarts this year."

Harry shook both boys' hands saying that he hoped to see Perry around the castle this coming year. Figuring he had overstayed his welcome, Harry thanked her again and rejoined the waiting Minister and his entourage.

The small party continued conversing as they approached the Bank. As they entered, Harry found his eyes drawn towards the three gargoyles perched above them. He shuddered involuntarily, wondering how *he* would have fared against them, had he accompanied Susan on the day of the attack. His thoughts were interrupted by a group of approaching goblins.

"Minister, Lord Potter, on behalf of the Goblin Council of Elders, we thank you for coming. Please follow me."

Harry let Rufus lead the way. This was much more for his benefit than anything else. Harry was playing the role that he despised, heroic window dressing. Quite simply, he hated it. It was just another of those 'necessary evils' that seemed to be plaguing him far too often. With an abundance of sarcasm he thought, 'Maybe, I should pitch that to Rita as the title for my autobiography – *Harry Potter: A Life of Necessary Evils*.'

Following a long ride in the 'one speed only' carts, Harry found himself staring at a large well-lit cave surrounded by hundreds of goblins. A gantry stood in the middle with a pedestal where two prisoners were held in a kneeling position. Cleftskull and Scarmaker met him dressed in ceremonial garb. Harry was introduced to the twelve members of the Goblin council. The experience was best described as surreal. One of the most surprising things was having

his picture taken by a pair of goblin photographers. Scarmaker looked somewhat offended when Harry asked him about it.

“Lord Potter, the goblin nation has its own media. A problem most of your kind has is the failure to see that other races are capable of having a society independent of yours. Your kind barely pays lip service to your Muggle governments. I had not expected such narrow mindedness from you.”

Harry adjusted his glasses knowing that his account manager was baiting him. He could sense that this, like so many other things in his life, was some kind of test. Rufus had warned him to be alert for such tests and respond forcefully. “Scarmaker, you mistake my ignorance of your society and customs for narrow-minded stupidity. I ask questions because I truly do not know. You are underestimating me. The dementors underestimated me. The one who calls himself Voldemort underestimates me. If you are smart, you won’t fall into that same trap.”

Harry noticed several of the heads turn in his direction. The moment of tension passed and his answer must have satisfied them. His account manager merely returned his glare before smiling slightly. The Minister nodded at him as Harry fell into place next to him. The Goblin council surrounded the podium and began speaking in their language. Cleftskull made his way over to the small group of humans and began to translate.

“Chippedfang and Spinebreaker, for the crime of dereliction of your posts and failure to perform your assigned duties to standard, you are each sentenced to death. You may choose to die by beheading or you may choose trial by combat. What is your choice?”

The first goblin was allowed to raise his head from the chopping block as he spoke in a loud voice. “I choose combat. Let those who feel guilt over the shedding of human blood in defense of our kin declare their champions.”

A murmur ran through the crowd of assembled goblins as the second prisoner repeated the same declaration word for word. Harry chanced a glance at the Minister to see him frowning. As a seasoned politician, he must clearly recognize the less than favorable environment.

Several of the council members drew weapons and others screamed at the pair in their language. Harry noticed that Cleftskull did not translate what was said.

“A vote has been called. The ratio of combatants is to be determined. The first showing of hands determines how many council members are in favor of enforcing the death penalty. The second is for those not in favor. There! Nine hands for, and three against. The two of them will have to fight six goblins in combat. The ‘armor of the accused’ is now being brought to the stage and each defender is given a sword and a knife. They may choose to fight together or separately. It appears they intend to fight separately.”

Harry watched as the one called Spinebreaker went first. The older goblin was still fast and could move fluidly with a sword. He was able to get inside the guard of the first ‘overly eager’ attacker and disembowel him. He pushed the dying goblin towards one of the other two, who were moving into a flanking position and hurled his knife at the third goblin. The knife was blocked away, but Spinebreaker scooped up the dead goblin’s sword and was now armed with two swords. He met the two attackers in a flurry of blades as steel rang out against steel. The other two were clearly having problems handling this apparently extremely dangerous goblin.

“If Spinebreaker slays one more of his attackers, his family retains both their honor and the right to fill his position,” Cleftskull said over the shouts and cheering of the masses surrounding them. It concerned Harry that most seemed to be cheering for Spinebreaker, who appeared to be tiring and was now on the defensive. It was at the moment Harry decided that the battle was almost over, that Spinebreaker blocked one of his attackers and snapped his leg out tripping the other one. A split second later and both attackers were lying in a heap of their own blood as Spinebreaker knelt gasping for breath and holding his gashed stomach. He staggered towards the edge of the circle. “If he crosses the circle, he is vindicated and will receive medical treatment.”

Oddly Harry felt like cheering for the goblin as he crossed the line and into the arms of two goblins. They started treating his injuries with bandages and potions. Several others moved in to clear the bodies.



Harry didn't need translation to tell that pretty much every goblin in the cave was chanting Spinebreaker's name in their language. Five minutes passed and the goblin medics helped him stand. He looked like he might fall any minute, but the cheers of the crowd seemed to lend him strength. An elder handed him the two swords he had used in battle. They were thrust high into the air and the screams became a deafening roar.

"Spinebreaker may now claim the right of retribution and challenge any of the Elders who judged against him in single combat. The battle will be fought in two days time. Spinebreaker has chosen to fight Boneripper in retribution. If he is successful, Spinebreaker will ascend to the position of Elder. The next battle will begin momentarily."

"What are his chances?"

"Boneripper is a skilled fighter, who relies on speed and power. Spinebreaker uses cunning and allows his opponent to commit to an attack and capitalize on their mistake. If the fight lasts more than two minutes Spinebreaker will win, otherwise Boneripper will triumph. Do you wish to place a wager?"

Harry shook his head 'no'. Somehow, betting on a goblin death match didn't seem like proper behavior. He watched as Chippedfang and his three attackers entered the Ring of Judgment and leaned in to the ear of Cleftskull, "May I ask why you are not an Elder?"

The grizzled looking goblin looked at him and bared his toothy maw. "We rise by guile and by the blade. The ancients bless me with skill in both. The Elders would not move against me unless they had five to one odds and even then I might prevail. I have enough favors to ensure that at most I would face two to one odds. A lesson for you, Lord Potter, it is best to be feared and respected, but if you can only choose one, then it is best to be feared."

Harry mulled that over as the next fight began. Cleftskull explained that Chippedfang had been on duty that morning, whereas Spinebreaker should have been there. It made Harry feel slightly better about wanting Spinebreaker to win, since the most he was really guilty of was being late for work. Though had he been there,

several humans might have survived and Susan wouldn't be rehabilitating her injury.

Chippedfang was nowhere near Spinebreaker's skill. The three aggressors advanced on him mercilessly. One quickly impaled him. Chippedfang tottered backwards dropping his sword. He stared at the sword in his gut. A mad look crossed his eyes as he shifted the knife into the hand with all his fingers. He screamed something in goblin and hurled his knife, directly at Rufus Scrimgeour.

Harry's hand stretched out instinctively as the bodyguards pushed the minister to the ground. He felt his magic surge and he banished the knife. "*Pello Novaculae!*" It flew backwards and struck the rock wall of the cave hard enough to shatter, showering the area with chips of rock and shards of steel. He sank to his knees with the effort of casting the banisher. It was confusing. Why would a simple spell take so much out of him? It was only then that he realized that his wand was still in the pocket of his robes. Again, Harry had cast a wandless spell. The last time he had summoned his broom. It hadn't taken anything out of him. Perhaps that was due to the presence of the Dementors that night?

Knowing he needed to capitalize on the moment, Harry looked at Scarmaker. "Another example of someone underestimating me."

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He sat in a very comfortable chair in his quarters reading through a stack of reports. The only sound was the continuous sound of something moving. The light dimmed momentarily. Lord Voldemort looked up from the latest reports of casualties to the rat on the tiny treadmill powering the light that he read by. "Peter, you would be wise to keep a constant speed. Your punishment for your involvement in Potter's attack is rather mild in comparison to what I *could* have done. It could be so much worse." He left the threat hanging and continued to read under a much brighter light.

The numbers were depressing, but the majority of those captured or killed had been neophytes. The only true loss had been Levski. He had enough cunning to bring Krum as an offering when he arrived. He was deeply troubled by the loss of the main nest of Dementors.

He did not have time to question the remaining ones – a prompt response was called for.

“Peter, I am finished reading now. Your nightly exercises will continue until I see that you understand the magnitude of the damage you have brought to our organization. You may leave and prepare for tonight’s festivities. We leave in one hour. I will be keeping an eye on you. If your performance fails to impress me, I may be forced to as you say, ‘take decisive managerial action.’ Do you understand my meaning?”

Peter changed back into his human form and scurried from the room, panting to catch his breath.

Minutes later, Lord Voldemort stood in front of his depleted ranks. “Tonight, my Death Eaters, we will remind them that we are a force to be reckoned with. Their little victories mean nothing! Augustus Rookwood, you will lead the new initiates through their rites of passage. Pick any three Muggle towns. Kill in large numbers. Wreak havoc and leave for the next one when the Ministry finally responds. Keep them occupied. Let them chase you all over the countryside. Rabastan Lestrangle, your team has three priority targets to eliminate. I would like to see Dumbledore’s allies in the Wizengamot thinned a bit. Finally, the Zabini family only seemed cooperative when their eldest male heir resided here as my guest. Damien Mulciber, teach them that my patience has its limits. How you choose to instruct this lesson is completely up to you. I encourage you to be creative. The rest of you will follow me into Hogsmeade. We will see if we can entice Dumbledore’s little group and some Aurors into playing with us. I do not wish to destroy the town, except the Hog’s Head. I wish to see Dumbledore’s pathetic brother dead and his business burnt to the ground. Beyond that, I merely wish to occupy them. Severus, we will keep them focused on us. Your team will execute its objective. Rookwood’s group leaves in thirty minutes. The next two groups leave thirty minutes after that. My group leaves shortly after that. Madam Edgecombe has managed to tap several Floo lines. Monitor the communications from here. When you feel that the time is right, unleash the girl and attack. Bring me victory, Severus. If that means killing the boy, then bring his head back as a trophy.”

Precisely at Eight p.m., Augustus Rookwood and his team departed from the Portkey pad. Voldemort watched the fifteen Death Eaters disappear. He knew that he was in no way shape or form ready for a battle. Still with Albus Dumbledore completely out of commission, he felt he could handle any other wizard or witch who dared get in his way.

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“Ms. Brown, could you come over here?” Colin’s voice quavered. He couldn’t get over the fact that he was dating Lavender. It was a bit strange that she insisted that he call her Ms. Brown at work, but he wasn’t about to complain. It made her sound older and quite frankly it turned him on. He was this close to getting her to pose for his camera *au natural* and wasn’t about to blow it.

Lavender looked up from her desk and cast a glance over her shoulder towards the watch commander, who was in the process of dispatching Aurors to the various Death Eater attacks. She had just handed the latest list to Trina to Floo the Obliviators, who appeared to be poised to collect some serious overtime. She was tired already, only two hours into the shift, but still she enjoyed how the whole headquarters seemed to revolve around her.

“What is it, Colin?”

“Um, we have another ‘Dark Lord’ on Floo four. He’s demanding to speak to my supervisor.”

“Circe! That’s the third one this week. I’ll handle it.” She grunted and got up from her desk and stomped to Floo Number four. It amazed her how positively stupid people could be. “This is Ms. Brown. What do you want?”

“I am Lord Voldemort. I appear to have misplaced a number of my Death Eaters in Hogsmeade. I was hoping you would be a dear and send some of your Aurors to help me find them.”

Lavender looked at parchment. “I see. According to this you’re in the Hog’s Head Tavern in Hogsmeade. So, I am supposed to believe that

the Dark Lord stopped in there for a drink and to use the Floo. You didn't by chance come in with a Centaur and a Goblin did you?"

"What nonsense is this?" The face in the fireplace asked.

"Oh, you haven't heard the one about the Dark Lord, the Goblin and the Centaur going into a bar? Listen, I'm busy here. Get someone else to tell it to you! Now, take off that ridiculous glamour charm and go back to drinking with all your other loser friends and quit wasting my damn time, you stupid, effing wanker!" With that Lavender pulled the disconnect lever.

Lord Voldemort looked at the flames in front of him. Fortunately, there had been no one left alive in the bar to hear the girl's tirade. The lifeless eyes of Aberforth Dumbledore stared at the ceiling next to him. The Dark Lord had sent four unmasked Death Eaters in ahead of him and waited two minutes for them to get to the other side of the room before sauntering in. Aberforth had been busy changing two of his Death Eaters into goats when Voldemort's killing curse struck him down. Voldemort savored that feeling of true ruthlessness – the ability to simply walk in somewhere and kill instantly. Even after all these years, the rush still hadn't gone away. He conjured a box. Chopped off the head and dropped it into the box. Casting an engorgement spell on one of the Owls, he decided to send Albus a get well soon present. The girl should be dealt with, but that could wait. What troubled him more was that someone out there was making up jokes about him. He sent the enlarged owl on its way and cast his Dark Mark, joining the two others already in the sky. Another wave of his wand spelled out the following message next to the Floo, using the pool of blood leaking from Aberforth's corpse.

*Who is joking now, Ms. Brown?*

He walked out of the bar. Peter raised his wand towards the structure. "No! I have changed my mind. The bar is to remain standing." The pops of Apparation signified that someone was coming. "Come Peter; let us bloody their noses a bit before we take our leave. Make sure someone rounds up our two *goats*. We'll figure out how to change them back later."

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Sturgis sat at the kitchen table reading the most recent issue of *the Quibbler*. It was a memorial issue to the late owner and full of a retrospective of his most outlandish columns. He cracked a smile every now and then over the exploits of those dreaded Rotfangs. Diggle sat next to him playing Solitaire. Sturgis found that to be as exciting as watching paint dry. Harry had come back a couple of hours ago and after chatting and eating some dinner, he'd begged off to go meditate. He felt bad for Harry Potter. Everyone expected him to be so much more than he is. Growing up he dreamed of being Beowulf, Merlin, or even Dumbledore, but as he watched the young man struggle with everyone's expectations, Sturgis realized what separated fantasy from harsh reality.

In a few days Hestia would be back and he could finally go see his wife and kids. Merlin knows he missed them. He hadn't seen them since the day of his trial and his swift sentencing to prison. Tonks and the late warden of the prison had managed to get some messages through. It was a poignant reminder of what he was missing.

A gong indicated an arriving Portkey. Diggle reached for his wand, as did Sturgis. Whoever was arriving would be in the parlor. Diggle was closer and moved to investigate. Seconds later he heard the older man exclaim, "Great Merlin!" Sturgis quickly got up and entered the room. It took a moment for his mind to register that it was Bill's French girlfriend. She was glowing, forcibly so as she wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing and pulling at Diggle's clothing. She was in all her unnatural glory! Her eyes bored into his and seemed so inviting. He shouldn't look. He's a married man. She beckoned him pushing the other wizard aside. He smacked into a wall before dazedly waddling towards her with his pants around his ankles.

"I want you!" she whispered urgently closing the distance between them.

"I can't," Sturgis said, making a lame denial. This couldn't possibly be happening to him, could it?

"I need you inside me now."

His wand dropped to the carpeted floor. His vows of fidelity were but a distant memory of another lifetime. All that mattered was this *angel*

in front of him. Anything she wanted, he would give to her. He fell back into the floor as she mounted him. If he were capable of looking away from her eyes and perfectly formed breasts, he would have seen Diggle frantically pawing at her. So consumed in what he was doing he never noticed her hand morphing into a claw and slashing 'Dirty Old Diggle' across the throat. He didn't even notice the thud of the body landing, anymore than he notice the clawed hand gouging his body. There was so much heat swirling around him. It was hard to breathe. The angel told him to hurry. It was all the encouragement he needed. As he screamed his praise to her, the heat intensified, searing him. He saw the fireball forming in what used to be her hands. The corneas of his eyes burned as the angel brought the fireball into his face. His lungs seared, breathing in the superheated air as he died.

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"Milord, there is a problem downstairs." Harry looked up from his meditation to see the once despised face of Sirius' mother in the portrait frame inside his sanctuary.

"What is it Mrs. Black?"

"The Veela girl is down there. Someone has given her Black Widow Rush! You are in great danger!"

"What?" Harry grabbed his armored vest and slid it on.

"A drug that drives her into a violent mating frenzy; your two guards are probably already dead. You should flee to Hogwarts."

"No! I need to help Sturgis and Dedalus!"

"The rush makes her allure stronger! You *will* fall prey to her charms!"

Harry finished buckling the dragon hide vest and hissed on his way out the door. "I can resist an Imperious from Voldemort. I can handle her!"

He didn't hear her response as he Apparated downstairs. "The Dark Lord only wants to kill you! She wants to fuck you first; then, she'll kill

you. Stupid teenage boy!” The woman in the portrait shrugged before deciding to head back to her downstairs portrait and see if the boy was everything he thought he was.

Harry reappeared in the kitchen. The smell of burnt flesh immediately assailed his senses. He choked back the bile in his throat. “Fleur! Stop! You need help!” he cried.

Harry sucked in his breath when she turned towards him as she rose from the dead man beneath her glowing, naked body. Her French accent was more pronounced than he had remembered. “Oh, Arry! Not such a leetle boy anymore are you? So much power and so young. If I had known you were ‘ere, I would not ‘ave wasted my time with these! Let me show you what I can do.”

“Fleur, you need help!” He tried the same approach as before. It wasn’t working. He cast a water charm hoping it would knock some sense into her and put out some of the small fires in the room.

“Oh, yez, I want your help, Arry. I want it so badly! You like to play in zee water?”

Harry watched her walking towards him. It was much harder to resist her than ever before. He focused. In his mind he saw Susan smiling at him. “Sorry Fleur, *Stupefy!*” His red beam struck her just below her magnificent breasts. Much to Harry’s shock she stumbled but did not fall down.

“Oh, you want to play rough.” Harry found himself diving out of the way of a fireball. In a way, it was shameful – the hero of the Wizarding World hiding behind a couch from a naked girl.

“You will not harm Harry Potter!” Dobby screamed. Pots and pans took on a life of their own and flew towards the crazed Frenchwoman. Harry fired a second stunner at her, which she dodged. She had completely transformed into her avian form. A knife buried itself in her leg, causing her to scream in pain. Harry tried a body bind, which also failed. He felt a pull on his magic and saw a white light hit Fleur in the side. She doubled over and vomited a slug. Her aura flared and she immediately stopped convulsing. Fleur was looking less seductive and more intimidating with each passing second.



Snarling in rage, Fleur created a massive fireball, throwing it towards him. He tried to Apparate, but felt something preventing him. Someone had erected wards! Harry doubted he had enough time to dodge the fireball. He covered his face with one hand and tried to vanish it with his wand. Something blocked his view as the heat wave washed over him. Whatever it was knocked him to the ground and fell on top of him. The couch was ablaze, but had shielded his legs. The vest had protected his chest. His clothing was mostly in tatters. He pushed whatever had covered his face off of him and blacked out for a second.

The stinging pain of the welts now covering his arms helped him regain his senses. He looked at the object next to him.

Large round eyes looked back at him.

“Dobby is a good elf,” the creature next to him croaked. The elf’s backside was badly burnt. Dobby’s eyes, which in life never stopped looking around, ceased their movement and became unfocused. The elf’s body faded from view like it had never been there. Even in death, House Elves did not leave a mess behind them.

“Did I hurt you, Arry? Come out, and I will make it better.” She must have changed back into her human form. Harry heard a gagging noise and knew that the portrait of Bellatrix had struck again. He looked at Sirius and saw that he was standing there, mesmerized, while his Mother was yelling at him to help his Lord. Mrs. Black and Bellatrix were the only female portraits on the first floor. The foul matron of the Black family crossed into Sirius’ portrait and smacked him full across the face. Harry meanwhile tried a leg locker and a blinding curse, but whatever this ‘Rush’ thing she had been given seemed to overpower or negate his spells. He banished the burnt couch, which only knocked her backwards. She tossed it off of her like it was a beanbag. Harry tried ropes and added super strength to Fleur’s inventory of new abilities. She tore them off of her and incinerated them, while continuing to mock him.

“Again, Arry! I will catch the next ones and use them to tie you up, so I can have my way with you.”

“Burn these! *Catena Ex Ferreus!*” She wouldn’t be able to get out of metal restraints. The spell shouldn’t be used against humans, but Harry was out of options; everything else had been utterly useless. A shot of iron chain sprang from his wand at the same time Sirius Black’s portrait returned to his senses. He gestured with his wand in the painting and pulled on his Lord’s magic. The spell - *Levicorpus* dragged Fleur up by her feet just before the chain reached her. Harry watched in horror as the heavy chain he’d intended to bind her wrapped around her slender neck as her body was dragged upwards. The only sound in the room was a muted crack as her neck broke. He sprinted over to her, ignorant of his own injuries. Her aura faded before his eyes as he stared into a face so beautiful, even in death.

There was no time for Harry to berate himself amid the scene of death and carnage. The front door exploded as Severus Snape and two shorter, masked Death Eaters entered through the wreckage.

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## Chapter 27 – All the King's Horses

"Time is of the essence, Mr. Castillo. You have all the materials you require," Snape said with his usual sneer.

"Yes, Mr. Snape. While you have provided the schematics for the wards, without which this job would be impossible, with the Fidelius charm in place, breaking the wards is an entirely different level of complexity; we are forced to do blanket disenchantments to cover the area between houses number 11 and 13. Okay, three of five layers are down; the other two will fall sooner without your interruptions," Castillo replied, returning to his chant.

Severus Snape had no recourse but to continue waiting for the hired curse breaker's efforts to bear fruit. They had been the same group used by his Master to invade Azkaban. Snape's signature had been removed from the gateway wards that protected the house. He could still see that ward past the Fidelius, but even apart from that layer of defense, the normal protections of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black would likely kill him before he reached the door, hence the need for the curse breakers. Once the wards were down, he could easily send in the brainwashed duo of Jones and Vance, now dressed in their Death Eater costumes, but with their wits addled, he preferred direct supervision.

For the last year, he claimed to have meticulously memorized the layout the protective wards. In truth, he merely verified someone else's work. He knew every layer like ingredients of a potion; it had been trivially easy to get the information, needing only a casual rebuke to the bookworm, that if she were so bored, maybe she could get the Curse Breaker to explain the wards on this house. Like a cheerful drone, she drew up a complete ward map for the house and then turned it in for extra credit during the school year. He didn't even have to resort to a compulsion charm! It was easy enough to retrieve it from his colleague's office. Perhaps if Granger survived, she would make an ideal slave, such a helpful little bint. He could find a use for someone with that level of attention to detail and breaking her would be a thrill unto itself.

All this information had been provided to the Mercenaries, so they could drop the wards and allow him access. The Veela had already been inside for five minutes; time and the advantage were slipping away.

Three additional female Death Eaters waited behind the Curse Breakers. "If I can find and destroy the Fidelius Anchor, you are to immediately attack." Each answered with a nod of their heads. The only item he had not been able to discover had been which item had been used to fix the Fidelius charm to the house. Only Black and Dumbledore had been present for the casting and he had never been able to learn what they had used.

"Fourth layer down, it's almost too easy this way." one of the Curse Breakers reported, taking a deep breath to begin chanting anew. One layer was left. Part of Severus hoped the boy was already dead. The other part hoped he wasn't. Potter was an insignificant bug and it was time to squash him. There were certain Necromantic potions that he was free and eager to make, now that he was no longer constrained to kiss the hem of the Headmaster and observe the rules of the Ministry. These potions required human organs as a base. Potter would do nicely. Rendering him down to his base components would be a task he would look forward to, although he suspected that Potter would somehow find a way to corrupt any potion he was part of. It was a chance Severus was willing to take.

"Vance, you will go through the parlor. Jones, you and I will go through the kitchen. Kill anything that moves," he said in a surprisingly calm voice. He particularly liked the silken voice of Vance replying "Yes, Master." It gave him a few other ideas to pass the next minute as he waited on the wands-for-hire to finish their work.

He turned to watch the house that only he and the other two could see. He had one last lesson to teach Potter; something he'd been waiting for since the first day the brat set foot in his classroom. He had chosen to not wear his mask. He wanted the boy to see who was coming for him.

"Mr. Snape, the last layer is down. I wish you good fortune. My team is now setting up wards to prevent Floo, Portkey and Apparition. You

have our services for fifteen additional minutes to maintain these wards, survey for any additional wards that may be hidden, or ward reflash. I remind you that, we are not contracted for combat services.”

Snape responded with a curt nod of his head. Of course, in the rare event that the wards reflash and maintain enough energy to discharge; it would not be Snape making the complaint. He would most likely be dead. He motioned to Jones and Vance to head towards the door. A smile crossed his lips, as he felt no sign of the wards.

“Open the door. Kill everyone inside!”

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“... and the Dark Lord says to the Goblin, ‘There’s no money in that pocket either and that’s not my wand!’ I thought it was pretty funny. Wayne Hopkins sent it to me. He said there are a bunch of them going around.” Justin Finch-Fletchley waited for Hannah’s shocked laughter before joining in with his own guffaws.

“Justin! I can’t believe people are making up jokes about You-Know-Who! I know you and Wayne grew up in the Muggle world, Justin, but he’s not something you want to make fun of!”

Justin scratched his head and refilled both his and Hannah’s glasses from the pitcher Madame Pomfrey had left. His family had barely gotten their luggage out of the car from their vacation in Monaco and Nice, when Hannah’s mother had shown up at the house. He had tried to explain Apparition to his family on several occasions. Mrs. Abbott’s arrival had provided a better, albeit alarming demonstration than he could have hoped for. After reviving his mother and calming his siblings, he and his father invited Annabeth Abbott in while his mother attempted to get the house in order after four weeks of vacancy.

Stunned to discover that there was a real war raging in the Wizarding world, Justin allowed himself only a brief smile upon learning that the underage restrictions had been suspended. His family had been bothering him for a demonstration, now he could finally show them what he could do! Upon learning that Hannah had suffered some sort

of mental trauma, he asked his parents' permission to go visit his girlfriend. He grabbed his suitcase, his unread correspondence and a couple of things from the magical world, mainly his wand, and left with Hannah's mother. Perhaps he would not have been so quick if he had known he would be sitting outside the infirmary for ninety minutes. Madame Pomfrey was only allowing a maximum of two visitors at a time.

During their third year, he had learned of Hannah's empathic abilities. That explained a lot about the girl. With that puzzle piece in place he understood the basis for her fear of large crowds and her wide mood swings. He sat outside waiting for fifteen minutes, catching up on letters from Wayne, Ernie and Megan Jones. The Puffs in his year were a pretty tight bunch. Learning about Zacharias' death was jarring – probably even more so than Cedric Diggory's death, as Justin hadn't really known him all that well. He *had* roomed with Smith and even liked him despite his abrasive personality.

Madam Pomfrey let him in as Chelsea and Peter Abbot were leaving. Hannah was the only patient. He gave Chelsea a quick smile and suffered, yet again, Peter Abbot's gaze. Justin knew the gaze meant, 'I do not believe you are good enough for my daughter.' He didn't like Peter Abbott any more than he liked Mr. Abbott's bigotry.

Justin's own father had been shocked to learn that the affluence and good name of the Finch-Fletchley family meant absolutely nothing in the Wizarding world. Laws and restrictions were applied to wealth that favored the Purebloods. The Ministry collected a hefty tax on Muggle money transferred into Gringotts above and beyond what was required for the cost of education. His family learned that the hard way when they arranged for a trust account left to Justin by his Grandfather to be deposited into the Magical Bank only to discover the tariffs had consumed over forty percent of the principal. Edward Finch-Fletchley was quite used to dealing with accountants in the everyday world. The Goblins were a rather tough pill for him to swallow.

After a lengthy inquiry to the Ministry, a letter from an *intern* in the Finance office informed him that the tariffs were necessary to insulate the magical economy from the over-inflated wealth of the Muggle

world. He had investigated the laws and found that loopholes existed for Purebloods to move large amounts of money with less severe penalties. Justin enjoyed magic, but knew that he would probably leave this world behind him when his education was complete.

When he was finally able to enter the ward, Justin's eyes immediately sought out his girlfriend. Hannah looked frail in the bed, her little mind shield necklace clutched protectively in her left hand. It brought back memories of their third year, the one plagued with dementors. He had brought her large amounts of sweets from Hogsmeade when she refused to leave the castle and ended up asking her out after the first Hogsmeade weekend.

"Hey, Spazz." His nickname came from all her frantic episodes back in first year, when Megan commented that Hannah was 'such a complete Spazz'.

Justin sat in one of the chairs next to her bed. Her free hand gripped his, tentatively at first, but then firmly.

"Hey, Finchy. I've missed you." The origin of her nickname for him was a rather obvious.

"Do you want to tell me what happened? Your mum said that you had experienced some mental trauma, but not much else. I don't even know why everyone is here at the castle."

Slowly Hannah caught him up with the events of the last month. He made her stop and repeat herself when she said that Susan was *engaged* to Harry. He couldn't recall the two of them really having a conversation at all last year. She got as far as telling him that she and Chelsea had used their skills to get information from Ginny Weasley, whom Justin could barely recall from the D.A. Then she broke into sobs. He didn't push her anymore. Instead he distracted her by telling her about his trip abroad and the stupid jokes in Wayne's letter.

"So, who hurt you?"

"Harry did, but Hannah had it coming, in a way. Hey Justin, it's good to see you." Susan said walking slowly into the room. She gave him a hug and a peck on the cheek before sitting in the other empty chair.

Setting the cane she was using up against the frame of the bed, she drew her wand and tapped her ankle mumbling a pain numbing charm.

Justin stared back at her in wonderment. *Why in the hell would Harry hurt Hannah?* A dark expression crossed his face as he considered settling the score with Potter. Justin knew, however, that even in his dreams he wouldn't fair very well against Harry Potter in a fight.

Justin felt Hannah go tense when Susan entered the room. Hannah slid the mind shield on looking like she was afraid of Susan.

"Relax, Hannah," Susan said. "I am kicking up my Occlumency. You should be okay. How are you doing?"

"Not so good. Did they say anything about how Ginny is doing?"

"They're keeping her at St. Mungo's to run more tests. Frankly I think they haven't a clue."

Justin had to interrupt, "Wait I'm confused. Why did Harry attack Hannah and what does Ginny Weasley have to do with it?"

Susan explained as best she could without mentioning Harry's method of attacking Voldemort, merely calling it a Ritual he was performing with Ginny's assistance. She did her best to justify why Hannah and Chelsea did what they did to Ginny, while also explaining how wrong the invasion was, and why Harry had responded so violently.

Justin had read a bit about Occlumency and Legilimency. He even went through some of the basic exercises with Hannah in the last few years. His willingness to study some obscure art, just so he could be close to her, helped to cement their relationship. He was still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that Hannah was in the hospital because Harry had come in angry over Ginny's injuries and waged some kind of mental battle against her. It sounded like something out of his old X-Men comic books; but then again, here he was with a magic wand, so maybe he should just accept it.



Apparently, Hannah had lost -- badly. Complicating matters, Hannah's father had then attacked Harry Potter, blowing him out the window! Had Justin been there, he wasn't sure whether he would be angry at Harry for hurting his girlfriend or ready to help him take Peter Abbott down a notch or three.

He reflected on this. "So, how angry was Harry when he left last night?"

"He got in touch with the Minister and went with a squad of Aurors to attack a bunch of Death Eaters and then he destroyed most of the Dementors. So, I'd have to say on a scale of one to ten he was somewhere in the nineties." She reached into her purse and pulled out the paper handing it to Justin. He skimmed the article and mentally further lowered his chances against Harry in *any* form of combat. "We had some nasty words -- I thought it was over between us, but through dumb luck we patched things up this morning. Now I'm here to try and salvage *our* friendship. You've got me in a bad situation, Hannah."

"Well, what Harry did to Hannah appears to be no worse than what they did to Ginny. So, is he going to lose all his privileges for the rest of his time here as well?" Justin asked. He'd been looking forward to the picnics the two of them had enjoyed near Hogsmeade.

Susan rolled her eyes. "Justin, I don't think Harry could care less about playing Quidditch. He's at the center of a war. If he goes to Hogsmeade, it will most likely be under Auror escort. From the sounds of it, we are probably both going to have bodyguards assigned to us this year."

"Why you?"

"We're *engaged*, Justin. God alone knows why, but I mean something to him. They'll try to get to him through me. Think about it, if you had a choice of going up against Harry Potter or kidnapping Susan Bones, which do you pick? I'll be shocked if I can go to the toilet by myself this year."

"Doesn't that bother you?" Hannah asked.

“Of course it does! I doubt there is much of an alternative though. I’ll never be as strong as Harry. We don’t talk about it, but we both know I’m a liability. I’ve watched him duel against Flitwick. The only reason the Professor can still beat him is, um never mind. I promised Harry that I wouldn’t discuss his training with anyone. Anyway, suffice to say, he’s very, very good and I’m just Susan.”

“So, when’s it going to be Susan Potter?” Justin asked, changing the subject. Under other circumstances, he would have been tempted to make a comment about Harry being controlling, but thought better of it. There was enough tension in the room already. He didn’t need to add to it.

“We’re going to do a traditional hand-fasting right before school. The formal wedding is probably going to be around Christmas. I’ll still come around the dorms to visit, but we’ll be living in a flat near the near the staff quarters.”

“No more s’mores in the common room?”

“Oh, I suppose I can swing by for some every now and then.”

A minute of silence passed and Justin knew his presence was interfering with what needed to happen. He leaned over to kiss Hannah before standing. Placing a hand on Susan’s shoulder he said, “I think it’s time for me to step outside so you two can talk things through. Don’t be too hard on each other and don’t say anything that you might regret tomorrow. Good friendships are hard to find and I’d hate to see you two lose yours. I’ll be back in a while, Spazz.”

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The silence continued until Justin shut the door. Hannah spoke first, apparently searching for a safe topic, “How’s your foot?”

“I’d say ‘fine’, but only if ‘fine’ translates into ‘hurts like hell most of the time.’”

Hannah pulled her legs back and sat Indian style on her bed, summoning a pillow from one of the other beds. She fluffed it and set it in front of Susan motioning for her to rest her foot on it. Susan

complied, thankful for the friendly gesture and looked at her swollen ankle. It was at times like these that she had to remind herself that she was lucky to still have a foot to be irritated by.

The silence lingered again before Susan spoke, also unwilling to approach the problem directly, "I've always said Justin is a smart one, for a guy that is."

"Yeah, losing him would be even worse than losing you," Hannah said earnestly. "I wish he had been here. He might have been able to talk me out of being such an idiot! Merlin, this is so stupid! We always said we could say anything to each other! I'm sorry. I didn't listen to you when I should have and this whole thing is my stupid fault."

The anxious feelings that Susan had been suppressing continued even though they had finally gotten to the heart of the matter. "It hurts, Hannah. Mostly, it hurts because you didn't *trust* me. Plus, I specifically asked both you and Chelsea to stay out of it, but you didn't. Why?"

"Whenever I was around him, he was always feeling guilty. It was strong enough to leak through his shields, and it was driving me insane. Whatever he was doing was wrong and he knew it. Now, we know what it was. I assumed he was shagging Ginny and your bond with him was blinding you to it. I had all these thoughts running through my head that he would just cheat on you whenever he felt like it and you wouldn't care or even worse that you would join him in some kind of crazy harem or something."

"Harry with a harem? Gah, he barely knows what to do with one girl in his bed much less a whole bunch of us! Where on earth did you get the idea that I'd accept a threesome?" Susan felt a strange and uncomfortable feeling of pleasure. *For the love of Merlin! That rubbish is revolting.*

"He really doesn't know what to do?" Hannah said making Susan blush. Hannah was fighting not to giggle.

"Well, I exaggerate. He caught on pretty quick, and I think he's progressing quite nicely. It's not like I'm exactly qualified to judge from all my worldly experience either, but I like it. Let's just drop my

sex life for the moment, okay?” Neither could stop the bout of laughter that overcame them. It was a good cleansing laughter followed by jokes about which girls would end up in Harry’s harem. Susan still felt the foreign twinge and fought against blushing as she thought about Harry’s improving skills as a lover. Susan then felt a bit of repressed anger and wondered if she was forgiving Hannah too quickly.

“So, did you take my Prefect spot?”

“Dumbledore offered, but I said no. I recommended Megan over Sally,” Susan said, responding a little too quickly, hoping she didn’t sound too irritable. For a change Hannah didn’t pick up on it.

“That’ll make it easier for Megan not to get caught. So, are we good?”

Susan thought for a long moment, “I guess, Hannah. We’re getting there. I’m in between a rock and a hard place here. I don’t want to lose you and I *can’t* lose him. He doesn’t plan on making nice, with you or your family either at least for a long time. I’ll try and talk to Chelsea, but with her mouth it’s not going to be easy and she needs to hear it from you too. I can let it slide, but Harry doesn’t exactly have my temper. He said he would be polite and not start anything. That is about all I can expect from him for a long time. No, wait. Let me finish first. You have to understand something though. If I ever have to choose between you and Harry, I’m going to choose him. I can’t afford to be some silly girl with a crush on him. Hell, until the war is over I can’t even be his number one priority, but he *has* to be mine. My job is to support him, love him, and keep him from going Dark. His job is to kill the bastard who murdered my family!” Susan had worked herself up into a bit of a tizzy. She could feel her heart beating faster. She felt like she wanted to hit something!

“Do you love him?”

Susan nodded.

“Okay. I understand. I won’t try and come between you and Harry. I’ll warn Chelsea to watch her mouth around him too. I expect that will be useless though. You’ll probably have to hex her a few times before

she gets it through her skull. So, let's talk about something else. Show me that new wand you got. Did you get a holster for it yet?"

Susan reached into her purse and retrieved an eight-inch willow and phoenix feather wand custom made for her. It worked almost as well as her willow and chimera fur. The anger and the anxiety lingered. Hopefully, Justin would be back soon.

"Harry got his too – eleven inches holly and chimera fur."

"Really, so like the two of you are ass-kicking dual-wand-carrying hit wizards now?"

"Yeah something like that." Susan said quietly letting Hannah inspect the wand.

"Do you mind if I put my shield back on?" Hannah asked.

"Why?"

"You're getting all upset; you have the arm of that chair in a death grip, you know, subtle clues like that?"

As Susan looked down, Justin and Madame Pomfrey came back into the infirmary. "Susan, Hannah the Dark Mark's floating over Hogsmeade! Some of the teachers are going to investigate."

Madame Pomfrey instructed Susan to escort Hannah out of the ward to make room in case they had to take in wounded. Justin offered to stay and help, given his more than average knowledge of medical spells. To their surprise, she accepted and asked if Susan would send any other students in the dorms willing to lend a hand.

Halfway to the dorms, Susan finally realized the source of her persisting emotional turmoil.

"Shit! Harry is in trouble!" Susan exclaimed. "I've got to find someone. Can you get to the dorms by yourself? Don't forget to send someone to help the nurse and Justin!" Susan didn't even wait for Hannah to answer before hobbling towards the Headmaster's office. She prayed that she would be in time to get Harry some help.

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Having spent many days and nights in this disgusting relic of magical living, Severus was impressed with the devastation wrought by the corrupted Veela. Smoke poured out as they opened the door. With a well-practiced flick his wand, he dispersed most of it. Vance headed straight into the parlor. With Jones at his flank, he moved towards Potter, who was standing by the suspended, naked girl. Reflexively, he tossed a Crucio that Potter dodged. Feeling no tug of Veela allure, he allowed himself a smile; the girl was dead.

*“Equus per Coactum!”* Jones yelled as she shot a blasting spell at Potter. Snape regretted not making his instructions more explicit to the addled witch. She is, after all, a weak, pathetic excuse for a witch, trying to cast a very powerful blasting spell; not a very workable formula. One so obviously lacking in talent and power should stick to basic spells.

Still the boy was forced to defend himself, no matter how inadequate Jones' attack. Snape launched a bone crusher, *“Ossium Contrico!”* He was shocked when the spell appeared as a shadow of its normal power. When had he been silenced? He concentrated on the counter-curse and wordlessly removed his enchantment as he dodged Potter's return fire.

*“Lacero!”*

Potter's cutting spell slashed his robes and opened a wound on his side.

Snape evaluated the damage on the fly; it was a lucky strike, nothing more. Potter followed it with a weak Reductor curse that was trivial to block. What bothered Snape more that Potter's pathetic defense was the streak of light hitting Jones, causing her to double over and retch. Potter hadn't cast it! He sent his very own custom severing curse at Potter, but found himself flung bodily into the air by – *Levicorpus!* It threw his aim off and gouged the wall. The shame of having his own spell used against him enraged him. It was only then that he discovered the source of the extra spells – the paintings. Black's face mocked him from the portrait frame. He deflected another curse from Potter as he canceled the *Levicorpus* spell. A gout of pain ripped his

shoulder as he tried to roll through the fall back to the ground. The pain reminded him that he was not as young as he used to be. Jones managed to catch Potter with a bludgeoning curse, throwing the brat back into the wall by the stairs. *Where the fuck was Vance?* Snape's eyes grew wide as he saw an all too familiar burst of green energy come for him.

*Surely it can't possibly end like this?*

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Harry grunted as he smacked into the wall. A wave of pain shot up his spine. He didn't need another battle, not now, not after Fleur! He had already been fighting for what seemed like an eternity. Harry could feel the intermittent drain on his magic from the paintings as they rose to his defense. Shards of broken plates and glasses cut into his hands as he rolled away, trying to shield himself while getting his bearings. He was focusing too much on trying to get Snape, which let the other one hammer him! In the parlor, he could see the third Death Eater stunned and bound already.

Drained and weakened, Harry decided to by himself some time. The spell didn't cost much in the way of energy. *This should throw the greasy bastard off balance. "Faux Kedavra!"* Harry screamed the last word. Green light flashed towards his enemy; pity it wasn't the real thing. Snape was down, but not out; around him flatware came to life and assaulted him. He swatted defensively as forks, knives, and even a spoon gouged, sliced and stabbed at him. Bloody spoon was trying to dig his eyes out! He searched his mind for something that would stop his other opponent. The opening he had waited for presented itself as Bellatrix's slug vomiting spell struck again, interrupting the swirling utensils. Taking a deep breath and pushing away his exhaustion he cast his next spell.

*"Telum Glacis!"*

The Death Eater was straightening up from his hunched over position when the meter long shard of jagged ice struck in his chest. His opponent swayed and dropped to the ground. He needed time, so he cast a smokescreen and scrambled up the steps. The pictures of Regulus, Orion and Pollux Black were gesturing to each other,

agreeing on a strategy. Harry felt another drain on his magic as Pollux's magically conjured water splashed the steps. Orion froze the water, making a sheet of ice. Regulus readied his tripping jinx. Harry lay prone on the upper landing, minimizing his profile, hoping to deliver a kill shot.

Making a quick tactical decision, he took off his ring and slid it into his pocket. The paintings were drawing too much energy; he needed *all* of his energy if he was going to survive this fight

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Snape dived out of the way of Potter's killing curse. He didn't feel the expected wash of power as the spell rushed by him. *Yes. Perhaps Potter isn't all I have been led to believe.* Moments before he was ready to send a barrage of spells towards the brat, he was hit with a slug-vomiting hex and another infernal silencer. This was becoming annoying! He cancelled the charms on him and sent a blasting curse into the painting of a young Bellatrix Black, destroying it.

He started to dodge a curse from Black's portrait, but it fizzled out before reaching him. The figure in the painting looked alarmed, but then made a typically juvenile obscene gesture. Sneering, Snape watched as his cutting curse hit that portrait, but the spell failed to cause any damage.

"Tough luck Snivellus! You always were a bit of a lightweight. Care to try again! I'm surprised your Master lets a squib like you carry a wand! Not going to beat Harry with you little potions mmmph!"

Snape did not the time to be insulted by a dead man's shade. Instead, he cast a sticking charm on one of cushions surviving the flaming wreckage of the couch and stuck it to the front of the painting, muzzling the mutt. He moved towards the steps Potter had fled up. The wretched paintings must be out of power to perform spells!

The smoke had cleared somewhat and Severus saw the paintings pointing at his current location. Snape moved up to the wall beside the steps. Damn! The cursed paintings were spotting for the boy. The wall shielding him exploded, throwing him onto the dining room table.



“Come and get me, Snivellus!” Harry jeered. “Or maybe you’re too scared to go after someone who can shoot back?”

He raised his voice to shout over the old crone’s screams. “I’m coming for you, you worthless brat! You can’t hide from me forever. No mummy to save you today!” He spared a glance into the parlor to see Vance’s limp, bound body. He revived and freed her. “Get him you worthless bitch!” he commanded. Obediently, she started up the steps, only to slip and fall, smacking her face repeatedly on the steps, falling back in the dining room in a crumpled heap.

Snape shrugged; he never expected her to be anything more than a distraction. He was already moving.

Crouching on the dining room table, Snape cast a spell to enhance his leap and blasted a hole in the ceiling. *The boy knows a few spells. He might actually be able to duel. Let’s see if he can fight!*

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Harry hoped, for a moment, that the *Tonare* he had just cast had found its mark, injuring injured Snape. *I can’t keep this up much longer!* The other Death Eater tried a frontal assault up the frozen, booby-trapped steps, paying the price. His bludgeoning curse had just plowed into the fallen Death Eater, when the floorboards on the other side of the landing erupted in a spray of timber shards and Snape burst through, landing mere meters in front of him.

Harry rolled away from the cutting curse, towards the stairs to the next level, but Snape’s cutter gashed his right leg. Harry banished the damaged banister and other woodwork directly into Snape, knocking the Death Eater back into the wall, pinning him for a moment.

*“Percuito!”*

Harry shot a piercing curse, but Snape’s defensive wandwork was faster as it vanished the debris, giving his enemy the freedom to dodge the spell. He sent a Reductor curse, which Snape parried with a wordlessly created shield and then cast a snake, which was vanished in midair. Snape replied with a curse Harry didn’t recognize. It was parried with a focused dueling shield, Harry silently thanking

Flitwick for teaching him a series of shields that were vastly more effective than the generic *Protego*. The professor had said that Snape's most dangerous attribute was his aptitude for silent magic. It appeared that Flitwick's assessment was spot on.

Knowing he had to maintain the offensive, Harry started a series of offensive spells. From his kneeling position, he stuck his wand around the corner and cast a bludgeoner while a flash of white light blinded him in reply.

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"*Magia Excandescio!*" Snape mouthed soundlessly sending a 'mage flare' to blind the boy. He took a bludgeoner like a kick to his midsection, as his spell released, partially blinding him as well. His vision would clear before Potter's, but it didn't matter. He knew the boy would instinctively retreat behind the shelter of the stairs leading to the third level. Snape blasted the backside of the stairs using the same strategy Potter employed, knowing there was less of a barrier there to weaken the spell.

Moving quickly, he blasted another hole to the third level and leapt again to the top of the stairs as his eyes readjusted – his landing lacking much of the grace of his previous one as his injuries took their toll on his performance. He yanked at a piece of the banister still embedded in his left arm and staunched the flow of blood before sending a heavy bone crusher down into the wreckage at one of Potter's arm. The ensuing scream of agony was a symphony of beauty to his ears.

Unwilling to wait for Potter to dig himself out with his undamaged or possibly less damaged arm, Snape cast *Levicorpus* and bodily dragged the worm from the wreckage, enjoying the boy's pain-filled ascent from the second to the third level.

"Use my own spells against me!" Snape screamed with rage. "You insignificant bug! *Pello Hostis!*"

A wave of his wand banished Potter through the wall and into the library. Snape staggered forward, bleeding from his own wounds and entered through the doorway. The boy lay sprawling on the ground by

one of the leather wingback chairs. He smiled, seeing no wand on the ground or in his opponent's hands. Christmas had indeed come early this year.

"Feel my wrath, Potter!" Snape hissed.

*Crucio!*

"Do you think your pathetic parents are watching you squirm in pain? How about your beloved godfather? Oh no, I'm not done with you yet."

*Crucio!*

"We're all alone now. I never got a chance to do this to your worthless father, and I've waited for so long to do this to you in his place. I will not be denied any longer."

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Harry thrashed in pain as the curses intensified the pain in his already injured body. His wand arm was shattered, bones protruding through the skin. His glasses and holly wand were somewhere below in the wreckage. Doing the only thing that came to mind, he dug into his pocket to get the Black ring back on his finger. Thankfully, it hadn't fallen out. Phineas Nigellus' portrait had always boasted of his precision with a cutting curse.

Harry's Cruciatus convulsions stopped a second later, allowing him to focus on Snape. The shocked man clutched the remains of his hand. He had just lost most of his thumb and first two fingers from the curse that destroyed his wand and ravaged his hand in the process. Harry wasted no time drawing his spare wand with his left hand as Snape also went for his backup wand.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Harry's spell was a fraction of a second quicker and Snape was forcibly separated from his spare wand. The former Potions Master of Hogwarts bounced off the wall and fell into a heap. Harry dragged himself to his feet and leaned on the chair as Snape desperately crawled towards his wand, three meters away.

*“Abrupmo per Incindia!”* Harry’s summoned a fire whip. It was time to end this.

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Snape struggled forward, knowing his life depended on reaching the wand. He thrust his good hand forward and tried to wandlessly summon it. His proficiency at wandless magic was nowhere near his skill with non-verbal casting, but the wand responded to his plea, sailing towards his hand.

For perhaps the briefest moment, Severus felt the sensation of the wood coming to rest in the palm of his hand before the searing white hot flash of light, every bit as blinding as his mage flare, blossomed before his eyes.

He whipped his arm around and blindly cast the killing curse. The boy was too close to dodge. There was silence as his vision cleared. The first thing he noted was Potter standing and looking at him with murder clearly visible in his eyes.

*The curse couldn’t have missed! Could it?*

It was only then that he noticed the flame-cutting curse had taken the bottom third of this arm, neatly cauterizing the wound. He stared in disbelief as his brain attempted to process that his hand was missing. The dead one-legged Auror often said he had a ‘phantom sensation’ where his limb used to be. Only now did finally understand what Moody was saying.

Potter stood in front of him, with the fire whip swirling above his head.

“There will be no more foolish wand waving for you, Snivellus!” Potter said in an oddly detached voice. “No bottling of glory; no potions to hold death at bay; not today.” His whip slashed downwards as Severus tried to move out of the way. It cost him part of his leg.

“Trying to leave so soon? No, we can’t have that!” Potter said mockingly. “You haven’t finished detention yet! Betrayals warrant at least a detention, don’t they?” The whip snapped downward. Snape

flopped forward. The one thought that resonated with crystal clarity in his mind was that the boy had snapped.

Severus Snape knew he was about to die. He could feel the heat approaching. He managed to cock his head and look back at Harry Potter and see the fire whip headed for his face. He felt the whip sear into his scalp as it wrapped around his skull.

“Let me show you how to clear your mind, Snivellus,” Potter wheezed. Then he tugged on the whip.

-----

Bill Weasley appeared in the corner of the damaged library. The portraits had urged him onward. Sirius had been particularly vocal that he stop staring at Fleur’s dead body and go help Harry. His ex-girlfriend lay naked, like some beautiful doll that a child had undressed and then flung to the ground. There would be time to grieve later. There would also be time to get answers from Emmy Vance. Tonks and Flitwick would have to handle that when they finished securing the outside.

In the middle of the room, oblivious to the small fires burning all around him stood Harry, looking like he had fought and lost a war. A barely coherent flame-cutting curse was flickering from his wand. Bill watched him staring down at the floor screaming at something.

“No clever comments on my techniques? ‘Potter, you are slicing when you should be mincing. Fifty points from Gryffindor!’ Tell me something, does greasy hair burn quicker? Hah hah hah! One thousand points for Gryffindor!”

“Harry? Harry?” Bill called out, though only a few feet away; Harry did not hear him. Bill stepped closer listening to Harry’s coughing laughter and dousing the fires separating the two of them. With the flames and smoke finally clearing, he was finally able to see what Harry was looking at.

It took all of his self-control not to immediately vomit.

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## Chapter 28 – Reflections of Anger and Madness

*Beta note: the scenes in this chapter portray different points of view and do not necessarily flow after each other in chronological order.*

London late at night

Bill Weasley sighed, swirling the tiny bit of Merlot left in the wineglass. His mother had always cautioned him about overstaying his welcome in someone else's home. "Anyway, we just got back from fighting in Hogsmeade, when Susan Bones comes stumbling into me, shouting that Harry was in trouble at – a place we use. Let me tell you, I was more than a little skeptical. I mean that place is warded to hell and back. So, to put her at ease, I rounded up Tonks and Professor Flitwick and we tried to Apparate there. It didn't work. Then we tried Portkeys; that didn't work either. That was when I knew Susan was on to something and we were in even bigger trouble than I thought."

Bill looked up from his glass. "Thank you for listening to me. I'm not usually like this babbling on and on, but I just felt like I needed to talk about it." Bill nodded in thanks to his hostess and poured another glass of wine. He preferred fire whiskey, but this was all that was available.

He set his wineglass down and then covered his face with both hands, as if to hide for a moment from the memories. "All right, I'll try to get through this as best I can. You'll have to forgive me, if I have to stop. There were a number of bodies in the house - people I knew personally. Where was I? Oh yeah, sorry. The three of us end up using a Portkey Tonks created to get us about two blocks away from – the place. I felt bad for poor Filius; he had to run on those tiny legs of his. Out in front of the place was a group of Curse Breakers, a mercenary outfit I knew from out of South America. They've been working both sides of the fence. I have to remember to put out the word. After all, any legitimate work they've been doing might be suspect if they're crooked enough to build in trapdoors in their own wards. They had a trio of Death Eaters with them and things didn't look good, but I guess the mercenaries weren't paid to fight so they made themselves scarce. Tonks is a lot better than I am at dueling -- I'm pretty average in that regard. Filius, on the other hand, is a tiny

terror. I heard a couple of people talking coming back from Hogsmeade; they said he crossed wands with public enemy number one and lived! Honestly, even if the mercs had stayed I think we would have taken them. Well, at least Tonks and Flitwick would have. I'd probably have gotten my arse handed to me. We captured one of the Death Eaters outside – it looked like all of them were women.”

Bill stood, finding that pacing was helping to calm him rather than trying to sit still in the chair. “Once the outside was secure, I started looking at – our place. All of the defenses were down except for the Fidelius charm. I was impressed that they’d dropped the wards until I found out the mercenaries had an effing ward map of the place. Damn Snape’s miserable soul to hell! So, I get inside and it’s like a bomb has gone off in there. The place is thick with smoke. I dropped a Bubblehead charm on myself and started clearing the air. I found a body dressed as a Death Eater with a chunk of ice as thick as my wrist and as long as my arm embedded in her chest. I flipped up her mask and found Hestia Jones. No effing way Tia was a Death Eater! I thought it was some kind of twisted joke. She didn’t have the mark on her arm. I stumbled through the wreckage to the other Death Eater by the steps and found it was Emmy Vance. She at least was still alive. I put a Bubblehead on her, stunned her and bound her. There weren’t any fires burning on this level so she was safe enough. Emmy and I go way back. We went to school together. She’s always been kind of special to me. I gave some thought to killing her then and there, because I wanted her alive long enough to answer some questions. I was still trying to digest all this when I found Fleur. I...”

Bill looked at his hostess almost gulping for breath. He put his hand on the kitchen counter to steady himself. When he continued his voice was strained, “I really cared about her. I was too stubborn to admit it, but I did. I knew she wasn’t ready for a long-term relationship. I figured she’d go back to France and get tired of all those pretty boys who fall over themselves trying to please her. I reckoned that when she grew up a bit, we could give it another go. Maybe she would have been the one? I guess I’ll never know, now. Fleur never got that chance to grow up. She was dead, naked with a broken neck. I don’t know how long I just stood there, seconds or maybe even minutes, just staring at her body. I saw the life we’d never get to have together.

I've never hated this fucking war more than I did just then. Give me a minute. I'm sorry to impose, but I need another drink."

Choking back a few tears of his own, he poured himself another glass. It was pretty good stuff. He mused sadly, that Fleur probably would have liked it. His hostess was patient and gave him time to regain his composure. He was grateful for that; otherwise he'd probably be sobbing like a baby. He sniffed loudly. His nose always ran when he was upset. In his youth, mum called it a 'dead giveaway'.

"Eventually the portraits got my attention; they were screaming at me. The Bubblehead charm had muffled it a bit, but I really wasn't paying attention. Hell, Morgana Le Fey and Circe could have been pole dancing in front of me and I wouldn't have noticed. Anyway, Sirius Black is screaming from someone else's painting that I need to go help Harry on the third floor. I finally pull my head out of my arse. Shit! I didn't even notice I was standing next to Diggle's body and, powers above save me, poor Sturgis. Whatever was done to him was worse than anything I've ever seen. It was horrible. Poor effing bastard! Months in Azkaban and he doesn't even get to see his wife and kids before he dies! I'm getting off topic, sorry. So I Apparate to the back corner of the library and I see Harry standing in the middle, screaming bloody murder and coughing up half a lung. He looked like death warmed over. There's all this fire and it's hard to see. He's got a weak little flame cutter still sputtering from his wand. I douse most of the fires and dissipate the smoke moving towards him. I cancel my bubblehead so I can get his attention, but he won't even look at me. I finally get around the big table and see what he is so interested in."

Bill paused taking another gulp of alcohol to steady him. "Like I said, Harry's got one arm hanging limp with bones sticking out of it, blood everywhere. He's got cuts all over too. Hell, his pant leg was on fire and he didn't even notice it. There he was, hair all burnt and he's got this crazy look in his eyes. He's screaming insults down at this *thing* in front of him. It took me a minute to figure out what it was."

"It was that fucker Snape! At least, what was left of him. Looked like Harry had been chopping him up for a while too. Other than part of his face, I don't think there was any part of him left intact that weighed



more than a kilo. Harry was still hacking away at him. The smell was awful.”

Bill turned and looked out the window of the flat. It had a nice view of the surrounding neighborhood. Outside was a street full of Muggles; all of them probably fast asleep, blissfully unaware of the joys and the horrors of the Magical World hidden from them. He knew he should finish the story. “So after coughing up my cookies I finally get Harry’s attention. He looked up from Snape’s remains with a dead expression on his face and said to me plain as day, ‘Death to all traitors.’ Good thing he was so out of it, otherwise his little cutter would have probably killed me too. I managed to get inside his guard and get a grasp on his wand. He struggled for a minute, but by then all the smoke and damage he’d sustained caught up to him. I haven’t known Harry Potter as long as most of the people in my family, but I have seen him wield magic like he was a force of nature. Not like us, by any means! We *cast* spells! He actually wields raw magic! He just kind of collapsed into me. I did what I could, mended his wounds and stopped his bleeding. He said they had done something to Fleur and turned her into some kind of monster. He was bawling like a babe again, apologizing to me for killing her. Hopefully, he’ll realize in time that it wasn’t his fault. Tonks finally showed up and showed me that damn map of our wards. Flitwick was sending the one Death Eater we caught outside to the Ministry and then Dora Portkeyed Emmy back to the castle. I guess she didn’t have the Mark on her either.”

He paused to allow his words to be digested. It was difficult knowing that two women he had known and worked with had ended up in Death Eater garb. Bill also remembered giving Hermione Granger pointers how to make that ward map. The guilt began to gnaw at him. Brushing it aside, for the moment, he plunged back into the story.

“We were about to take Harry to Poppy, when Dora put her hand on my shoulder. She told me how sorry she was about Fleur. So I told her that Fleur was *supposed* to be safe. It wasn’t fair. She was going to stay with Aimee Beaucourt for a week or two and then head back to France. That was when Harry, who hadn’t said anything for a while, mumbled something. I thought I heard him, but I made him repeat it anyway. Do you know what he said? No, I’m sure you don’t. You weren’t there, so how could you know? Anyway, Harry looks up with

this blank expression on his face and he says, 'Wormtail knows a Death Eater named Aimee Beaucourt.' I don't want to say how he knows that little nugget of information, but I believed him. So, I borrowed some equipment from Tonks and let her take Harry back to Hogwarts."

Bill sat down on the couch across from the figure in front of him. His expression darkened and the person across from him paled in fear. "That's when I came here, Aimee. That's when I broke that pathetic little warding job on your flat. Did you do that or pay for it? Pretty shoddy work either way, I hope you didn't pay too much for it. We had a little chat, I found the dark mark on your arm and then you told me everything that you knew after you sipped some Veritaserum. It's a pity that you didn't know more, because you don't know enough to be worth anything to us. So, after I recorded all of that, I gave you a little Obliviation because you were pretty messed up from the Veritaserum. I want us to have this chat, starting fresh as it were."

Bill angrily tapped his wand on the cushions sending little multicolored sparks out of the end. "The funny thing is I just came here tonight to capture you. I was going to turn you over like a good little Order member. Sure I was upset, but I'm not really a violent person. Then, I find out that this was pretty much all your doing. You were the one who cooked up this little plan, to capture and use our members against us, to give Fleur that Veela rush potion. If I hadn't come here tonight, we probably would have been giving all the credit for this to that dead bastard Snape. Other than nicking the map of the wards, it turns out he was just part of the expendable muscle tonight. I wonder if Snape is mad that he died for someone else's plan?"

Bill waited a minute to get control of his rage. "So Aimee, what am I to do with you? Do I turn you over to the Ministry? They've got this big push against all these 'foreign fighters' that your master is bringing in. Might even get myself a little reward. I reckon they'd make a big deal out of trying you. It'd probably make some big political hay, though. Fleur told me that your family was fairly well-connected back in France. So, it would become one of those big political messes, where we'd find out who has more pull with your Ministry – your family or Fleur's? I think that's a waste of time. Don't you?"

Bill summoned a container of salt and conjured a bowl, while the immobilized and silenced Death Eater looked up in terror. He took a knife and cut her palm, draining some blood into the bowl. He mixed it and began muttering a chant over it. The chant lasted a full minute before the churning mixture in the bowl settled down. He vanished her clothing, ignoring her eyes, widening in terror. He could see an unspoken plea for her life in them.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Aimee! I don’t have those sorts of plans tonight; I suppose I should explain what is about to happen. This is a little ritual I learned in Egypt. I’m sure Fleur told you that I’m a fairly capable Curse Breaker? Well, this one is a mummification ritual. I’m going to draw a series of runes on your body. The enchanted mixture will draw the moisture out of your body and you’ll become a mummy. I know what you’re thinking? ‘Bill, they do that to *dead* bodies. *I’m* still alive.’ Well, actually some of the more twisted Pharaohs used to do it to their enemies while they were still alive. The dehydration will cause painful cramps at first and then, eventually, and even more painful death. If my research is correct, you should die about eight minutes before my silencing spell wears off and ten minutes before the immobilization jinx fades. Whoever comes in here next, if they are one of yours, well they’ll probably assume Voldemort killed you for being a fuck-up. If they aren’t Death Eaters, well who is going to cry over some little French Death Eater slag?”

Ten minutes later Bill finished drawing the runes on her naked skin. He vanished the bowl and its contents. Then he began a chant in a language Aimee recognized as Old Egyptian. The runes on her body begin to glow. Bill went into her bedroom and brought out a makeup mirror. He set the mirror down on the table and adjusted it so the witch could see her reflection. It had only been perhaps a couple of minutes and already the skin was drying out and her features seemed to be withering.

“Goodbye, Aimee Beaucourt. I want you to be able to see the reward your ambition and hunger for power has brought you. If I were merciful, I’d just kill you now, but I’ll show you the same mercy you showed my friends.”

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## Hogwarts

After Bill Weasley took off from Hogwarts with Tonks and Professor Flitwick, a visibly limping Professor Sprout took Susan to the Headmaster's office, where Dumbledore and McGonagall listened to Floo reports from the Ministry and the Order, worry written all over their faces. He gestured to a chair for her to sit. Fawkes, sensing her distress, landed in front of her and sang softly for a moment before disappearing, most likely to the hospital ward. Someone there needed the Phoenix more than she did.

The attacks stopped as quickly as they had begun. To Susan it seemed like random violence, reminding the population that Riddle wasn't about to go quietly into the night. She was rubbish at strategy, but she knew enough to realize that this was really all about Harry. He was isolated in London, with only Diggle and Podmore to protect him. She looked at the empty frame of Phineas Nigellus, willing him to come into his portrait to tell her what is happening. Is this what her life was to be - anxious waiting followed by relief or despair? Was she really cut out for this? Every girl dreamed of being rescued by her fairy-tale prince. Those stories neglected to mention the terror that goes along with knowing that somewhere out there, her prince was fighting for his life.

She was grateful for the pangs of anger, rage, terror and other emotions she couldn't identify – things barely sensed through the link. Susan tried to shut out the world and focus on that tiny thread; the bond was her connection to the man she told Hannah she loved. She hadn't even said those words to Harry yet.

*'Please let him be safe!'*

Minutes passed. She felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up to see the concerned face of the normally stoic Deputy Headmistress. The old witch handed her a tissue. Susan wiped away the tears streaming down her cheek.

"Nymphadora and Filius have returned with Harry. He is badly injured." The Headmaster said looking at her.

Susan started to stand. "I should go."

He motioned for her to sit down. "You'll be in the way down there, much as I would be. Madame Pomfrey has ample assistance. Let us wait for Phineas. He will be here shortly."

The seconds ticked away until the echo of the most loathed Headmaster in Hogwarts' history wandered into his painting. "My apologies, Albus and Lady Susan, many of the paintings were damaged or destroyed in the battle. I had to travel to the Family Vault to confer with the ones on the first and second floors to gather the full story behind the battle. I believe I have all the pertinent facts now."

In a voice reminding her of the emotionless drones that read the news on the Wireless, he began to recount the battle at the Most Ancient and Noble house of Black. Susan knew Phineas wouldn't mention the special capabilities of the paintings, as Harry had expressly forbid it.

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#### Hogwarts Infirmary

Susan's tone of voice left no real room for discussion "I need to see him."

Madame Pomfrey hesitated. She had almost decided to dismiss her, but there was a glint of anger in the young witch's eyes. Poppy was too tired to fight. "Very well. He is resting right now, but there are other patients in the ward. Do not disturb them."

Susan hobbled into the ward. In the previous five years, she had been in here just three times for potion burns and once to help get her hair re-grown after the 'Blast-Ended Skrewt incident.' Since becoming involved with Harry, the infirmary had become a second home. There were quite a few people in there. She nodded to Hannah's mother, one leg in traction, suspended in the air. Peter Abbott sat in the chair next to her with several bandages on his left arm, but he refused to meet her glare. She heard the soft moaning of Molly Weasley as the witch tossed restlessly in her sleep, probably reliving some of the horrors she had just witnessed. Her husband gave Susan a sad smile from his own bed. At the end of the ward, she saw Fred Weasley and Tonks standing over yet another injured

person. Susan figured they must have a dome of silence around them because it looked like they were yelling, but she couldn't hear a thing. Fred even had his wand out. Susan wasn't even sure where McGonagall came from, but the Professor separated the two of them and sent an angry looking Fred Weasley stalking towards the exit.

She turned her attention back to the person in the bed in front of her.

"What am I supposed to with you, Harry? I turn my back for a moment and you're back in trouble again," she said, trying to smile bravely.

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Earlier that evening in Hogsmeade

Voldemort stood defiant as Hogsmeade turned into a veritable fireworks display. Even with his recent injuries there was no one on the battlefield that came close to his level of power. His opponents were none other than Filius Flitwick and two lackeys from the Order. The Charms master was in fine dueling form, providing a hearty workout. Time had not dulled the Ravenclaw's reflexes. Like most high-caliber duelists, the dwarf employed passive Legilimency to gain split second advantages.

He cut down one of Dumbledore's new recruits and parried two fast curses from Flitwick. He was hoping to make Dumbledore fill yet another teaching position before the start of the school year. That's when the flood of memories and emotions broke over him like a cresting wall of water. Potter from within and Flitwick from without! He staggered backwards barely remaining upright. A pitifully weak piercing curse stabbed his arm, drawing a thin line of blood. He angrily snapped off a blasting curse at the person, who had managed a lucky strike against him, injuring the leg of the witch and sending her tumbling backwards in a mass of red hair.

*'No! No! Please do not tell me I was just cursed by Molly Weasley? The utter humiliation!'*

Voldemort focused and stayed on the defensive; it was all he could do with whatever was happening to Potter!

‘Severus must be torturing him! It should all be over soon; still, if the death of the boy creates a backlash, it would not be prudent to remain engaged in battle.’

“Withdraw!” Voldemort commanded loudly and triggered his Portkey.

*‘Some other time, Filius.’*

The pounding in his skull continued as he returned to headquarters. If anything, it intensified. He was both curious and wary of the sensations coming through the link. It reminded him of watching a violent storm from a distance. He toyed with the notion of lowering his shield and following the link back to the source. Voldemort extended a tendril of his mind only to slam his mental shields back into place, slamming it so hard that his head throbbed yet more.

Suddenly the swirling mass of fractured thoughts stopped, as though someone had thrown a switch. He couldn’t detect anything, initially. Allowing his lips to curl into a smile, he allowed himself a smile at Snape’s success. The boy was no more. The bane of his existence was ... wait! There was faint rumbling still.

*‘No! He still lives! Impossible!’*

In the hallways surrounding Lord Voldemort’s private sanctuary, the Death Eaters passing close enough heard howls of anger – none dared investigate.

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## International Portkey Terminal

Draco Malfoy fished a galleon out of his pocket and handed it to the Knight Bus driver, accepting his change, and not really trying to hide his disgust at having to get onboard like the rest of the cattle that usually milled here. Mother was not at the International Portkey terminal waiting for him and the Floo at Malfoy manor was offline.

‘At least my trunk is spelled to be near weightless! It would not do for me to be seen struggling with my own luggage.’

As the Knight Bus hurtled into the English Countryside, Draco reflected on his eight weeks of debauchery. The wine flowed freely. Women serviced him, some willingly and some not. True, he could not use his wand, but Potions is his best subject for a reason! It had more to do with his drive to match his Godfather's achievements and less to do with his Godfather's blatant favoritism. Yes, he had been granted private lessons and advanced tutoring, but he worked hard with his Head of House to excel.

Draco had been surprised at his mother's offer of an extended European vacation. She had told him it would take his mind off his father's 'unfortunate circumstances'. It was also meant to reward him for his superior academic performance. He would have less time to plot and scheme this year without the assistance of his tutors, but sixth year is considered to be an 'off' year recovering from OWLS and eventually preparing for NEWTS.

The bus came to an abrupt stop and he exited. It was another half a kilometer from the end of the road to the mansion gates. Sighing, he called for Crud. The house elf had only been with the family since his third year. The thing was not nearly as efficient as the elf it replaced. Father had been too busy to properly break it in and mother was never much of a disciplinarian.

He waited for a minute and tried to summon it again with the same results. He allowed his anger to build. *I am not a patient man! This is getting on my last nerve!*

Grabbing his trunk, he stalked down the road. One of his few acknowledged fault was his tunnel vision when truly angry. The Malfoy temperament was legendary. Had he been able to keep his anger in check, he might have noticed the lawn looked unkempt and the lights of the main house were dark. Drawing his wand he tapped the touchstone at the barred gates. It would sound a gong inside announcing his presence.

It was only after his third tap on the touchstone did he notice the placard affixed to the gate.

NOTICE OF SEIZURE



*PER MINISTRY DIRECTIVES, THE ESTATE OF LUCIUS MALFOY IS HEREBY SEIZED. THIS PROPERTY AND THE CONTENTS WILL BE AUCTIONED ON SEPTEMBER 8, 1996. PLEASE MAKE ALL INQUIRIES AND REQUESTS FOR TOURS OF THIS PROPERTY TO THE OFFICE OF ASSET DISBURSEMENT.*

Draco wasn't sure how long he stared at the placard. It took awhile for the truth to sink in. His mind processed the ramifications. The Ministry could seize properties and levy fines, but the Goblins would not surrender the family vaults or their contents. He was tempted to utilize the secret entrance and salvage what he could from the house, but immediately discarded the plan. The Ministry could check the logs at the Portkey terminal and the Knight Bus. Even the most dim witted among them would be able to reach that conclusion.

Checking his watch to discover it was nearing midnight, he knew he should be leaving. The only question was, where was he to head? Surely the Parkinson's would take him in. Their estate was ten minutes by broom from here. It would be awkward carrying his weightless trunk, but he disliked the idea of leaving it here.

Minutes later Draco landed only to see a similar placard at the Parkinson estate. It stated that Boris Parkinson was a captured and convicted Death Eater. A second placard indicated the new address of Donna Nott-Parkinson and her daughter. He cursed himself for not following the news during his vacation. They must have replaced Fudge. Whoever the replacement was, the new Minister was not playing around.

Opting not to try and find Pansy and her mother tonight. He recalled the Knight Bus. He would return to London for now. In the eight weeks he had been gone, the landscape had changed significantly. Draco would need to adapt to this change.

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Diagon Alley

Forgoing more posh accommodations, Draco took a room at the Leaky Cauldron. His money bag would have easily allowed him to stay at one of the more upscale ones, but he was understandably

cautious. In the morning, he used one of the three post owls at the Inn to send a brief message to Pansy.

*Pansy,*

*I have returned from vacation and discovered my father's home has been seized. I saw that the same fate has befallen your family as well. Do you have any knowledge of my mother's whereabouts? I am currently staying at the Leaky Cauldron and expect to be here for at least the next twenty-four hours.*

*Draco*

He arrived at the bank noting the additional troll guards in the lobby. There had never been more than two at any given time. Five were currently present. He also noted a witch in Auror robes discreetly seated back in the area where normally only Goblins had sat. The scene offered no answers, only more questions.

He was pleased to see that his personal vault had significantly more gold than it had when he left. There was a letter and a large envelope waiting for him. He recognized his mother's elegant writing.

*Dear Son,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. I have taken my leave of England. The war does not bode well for all in this country. With luck, I was able to contact you on the continent, but it may be impossible.*

*I have acted in my own interest and had the new patriarch of the Black family dissolve my marriage to your father. His actions have brought shame upon the name I was once proud and honored to take. I had a way out and chose to exercise it. My departure was somewhat hurried, as you can well imagine, your Uncle Tiberius would most likely have attempted to kill me were he to learn of my plans.*

*Unfortunately, you do not have that luxury. Your name will now carry a stigma with it. No doubt your father will continue to try and recruit you into his master's service. One of my final acts as Lucius' legal proxy was to emancipate you. My son, you are now your own man.*

*Make your decisions with your best interests in mind - not your father's interests or his Master's. With your father marked, you most likely will not be marked, to preserve the continuance of the Senior Malfoy line. I doubt he ever disclosed this to you, but he was not marked until after your birth ensured that a male heir was available. Prior to that he acted as others do today, doing his bidding yet remaining unmarked.*

*In the envelope, you will find the name of the solicitors you may wish to contact. I have also enclosed transfer applications for both Beauxbatons and Drumstrang. I encourage you to consider those options. You will also find a copy of your betrothal contract to the Parkinson girl. In addition to granting your emancipation, I have also freed you from this responsibility, unless you choose to uphold it. I recommend you carefully weigh your options and perhaps attempt to negotiate a better deal for yourself. Again, the choice is now yours. You owe it to your heritage to ensure that your line survives into the next generation. If the pureblood mantra is what you actually believe in instead of something you subscribe to when it is convenient, then this should be your primary goal.*

Enough money has been taken from the family vaults and deposited into yours to allow you the means to continue your education here or abroad. If you choose abroad, you will need to judiciously use the galleons to expedite your transfer.

*I cannot emphasize how impractical it is for you to remain in England. If you stay, you will be drawn into the war in one way or another. Years ago I was a teenager in a similar situation. I chose to honor my family and marry into the Malfoy family as my method of protection. It was protection with a high price. I found myself a trophy wife in a loveless marriage, not allowed to bear more children and limited in my ability to rear my only son. I do not wish that life on anyone.*

*Draco, I know you do not particularly care for divination and seers, but I have come to place certain stock in their sayings. In my trips abroad during the last year, I consulted three of them. Independently, they all agreed that the next few years are to be unfavorable to those with the last name of Malfoy. You now have the means needed to make your own choices in life.*

*Be safe my child,*

*Narcissa Black*

His hand trembled as he finished the letter. Anger, shame, and frustration tinged with a slight fear, passed through him. He almost impulsively tore the transfer applications to shreds.

*'No! I will not dismiss the idea, until I have thought it through. For the moment, I am my own man. How long that will last is impossible to know.'*

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### Hogwarts Guest Accommodations

It was three days before Harry was released from the hospital. After a single off-color comment by Ron about how 'Bloody effing brilliant it was that you offed Snape' followed by Hermione's histrionic, guilt laden apologies for creating the ward map that was stolen by Snape, Harry wasn't looking forward to spending time with the other displaced students. While Harry was still in the hospital, Tonks tore into Hermione something fierce, suggesting she get started on mapping out the castle's wards so as to finish her 'fascinating and completely theoretical' project. Lupin dragged his raging girlfriend out of Ravenclaw tower while she continued to scream at Hermione, going well over the top when she suggested that Hermione should go back and drain the blood from Diggle and Jones' corpses to use for ink. Everyone knew that Tonks' tirades were uncalled for, but all the same it took its toll on Hermione. After Hermione's third attempted apology sent the perpetually volatile Harry storming from the room, Susan reached her limit.

"Look Hermione, I'm going to say this just one time. You -- were -- used. It's a lousy thing to happen to a nice person, but you need to quit trying to talk to Harry about it. He's not ready to talk. He's too busy tearing himself up to even consider how badly *you* feel. It may sound shallow and crass, but that's just the way it is. Right now you are only making it worse." Susan looked up at the small crowd that had gathered. "I'm going to see Dumbledore. Leave -- Harry -- *alone*." She left the unspoken 'or else' off the end of the sentence.

And so it was that they moved into their new quarters, away from the other students. The spacious quarters were actually rather quiet and bare. Trixie and several Hogwarts elves were leading the salvage operations at the ruined headquarters. The sanctuary room would need to be opened by Harry, but only when he was ready. Several storerooms at the castle were currently filled with what had been salvaged from the Most Noble and Ancient House of Black. The house itself would most likely need to be razed and rebuilt.

For his part, Harry was sullen, withdrawn and moody. He came to bed hours after Susan turned in, and was gone by the time she woke up. He barely talked to her and refused any and all of her advances, including her romantic overtures. Harry was shutting down; when she suggested he talk to Flitwick about resuming training, he declined, saying that he wanted to wait until his injuries fully healed. She countered that Madame Pomfrey had cleared him to resume physical activity. He ignored her for the rest of the evening. It had been a very long four days.

Susan had hoped to use the same trick on Harry that the healer at St. Mungos had used on her when Trixie recovered his wand from the wreckage. She left a cloth and a can of wand polish on the nightstand next to the two wands. As far as she could tell, neither the wands nor the polish had been touched. Harry had touched the rag, throwing it to the floor after blowing his nose with it. She almost wished she could owl her healer for advice. Dumbledore had left for a meeting of the ICW and none of the other teachers seemed willing to confront Harry without the Headmaster's backing.

It wasn't exactly true, the Vampire Coedus might, but Susan was leery of letting the two of them to talk privately.

The time was not totally without good news. Ginny Weasley returned. Her magic was weak, but by all estimations, she would make a full, albeit slow recovery. She spoke with a slight lisp and her hands occasionally trembled. A sad look of acceptance crossed the younger witch's face as she told the group that she wouldn't be allowed to have her wand back for roughly four weeks to prevent lasting damage to her magical core. Her brothers had a small party to cheer her up,

Susan had tried to convince Harry to come, but ended up going alone. Coming home from the party she knew she was going to take action.

To her, wallowing in Harry's fog was a form of non-existence. She would take him for a walk down to the lake every day. Her ankle was slowly improving and walking was part of her therapy. Susan allowed one more day to go by, while she played out the possible arguments and counter arguments in her head. Without knocking she entered his private quarters where he was sprawled across the bed with a book in his hand. She sat quietly, waiting for him to speak. He didn't.

"Harry, this has got to end." Harry looked up from his Transfiguration text with a blank look on his face. He hadn't turned the page in twenty minutes. He regarded her carefully for a minute and then looked back down at the book.

"Harry, stop avoiding it. I want you to talk to me."

"I thought you were telling everyone else to leave me be," he mumbled.

*And so it begins.*

"Well, I'm *not* everyone else," she said, unconsciously striking a fierce pose. "You don't have to talk to *everyone*, but you need to talk to *someone* and it might as well be me. We're supposed to do our handfasting in ten days. You need to start training again. We've been in here five days and you haven't touched your wands once! You're not going to bore Riddle to death."

"So it's not about me and my problems," he said, his voice dripping with disdain. "It's about me killing Riddle. Am I *your* weapon now too? Who cares how many people I have to kill along the way? What about that, Susan?"

"Damnation! Harry, there's a war going on! Sometimes the wrong people die. I liked Fleur, but thanks to Riddle, she was set on killing you. Pomfrey says the Black Widow Rush was probably going to kill her anyway. Jones and Vance had orders to kill you. How angry was I after the mess in Gringotts? You got all of five minutes of silent treatment! You've been conscious for a week now! You talked a

hundred words or so on the first day and then basically shut down. I kept everyone away. I told them to give you time. Well, the time's up Harry. Enough self-pity, it's time to move on."

"Move on? Move on where?" Harry croaked. "You've got all the answers, tell me." She could see his hands trembling. There was a feeling of wild magic in the air.

"No! You tell me," Susan exclaimed. "Our bond is getting stronger, Harry, I've been as miserable as you are. You're scared right now. Why?"

"You know why!" The bed shook slightly.

"Say it then!"

"No!" Books fell from the shelf; his fists clenched. Susan wondered if he would hit her. She weighed the risk and continued.

"Say it, Harry! It's not about Fleur or the rest. It's about Snape. You lost it when you killed him. So what? Even you have your breaking point!"

"Is that what you want me to say? That I snapped? That I lost it? That I barely remember killing him?" Harry bellowed. "I remember every single second of it! I see it every night! I sliced him into bits and I didn't care! I'd still be there if it wasn't for Bill! I enjoyed it, Susan! I'm a sick, crazy bastard! I'm a monster!" With this last declaration the sheets ignited. Susan doused them immediately.

Susan moved closer. "Listen to me, Harry! You are not a monster. A monster wouldn't feel remorse or guilt and you're wallowing in both. Snape was the monster; all you did was defend yourself. Don't blame yourself for surviving!"

Harry stared straight ahead, refusing to meet her gaze. "I'm afraid, Susan. It could happen again. I could snap again. The rage is there, just below the surface; I felt it when I had to get away from Hermione. You can probably feel it too," Harry said, turning away from her. "Did Dumbledore tell you about my Animagus form? I'm a raven, but when I'm transformed I can draw energy away like a Dementor. One day,

I'll probably be able to do it in my human form, and after that I'll probably go all the way and just become a dementor myself. Face it, I'm a monster!"

Susan digested the news. Dumbledore hadn't mentioned it. She had to play her bluff. "We'll find a way to sever the link to them, even if you have to hunt every last Dementor in the world down. I won't let you go dark. You can win, Harry, but you have to snap out of it. You've got to do it for me, for our baby."

Susan felt the swirling mass of wild magic do the equivalent of a hiccup. Harry's eyes were wide – she had his undivided attention.

"Baby?"

"I'm late, Harry – maybe it means something and maybe it doesn't, I'm not sure. Why don't you pick up your wand and find out?" She wasn't more than a day late, which wasn't unusual at all; it was all a bluff to shock him into living again; there was probably nothing more shocking than this. She recited the little rhyme most witches learn with the onset of puberty, "'If the aura stays blue, then no baby is due. If the aura turns pink, wonder what people will think.' Go ahead Harry. I showed you the charm. Cast it on me."

Harry hesitated, "Uh, maybe you should. I - ah..."

Susan pointed at the nightstand. "Harry, make the first spell you cast after this ordeal a meaningful one – make it about life and hope for tomorrow. Help *us*, Harry. You said it before, 'remember *us*', our special phrase."

He slowly reached over, hesitating as if the wand would sting him, taking it in his right hand. He exhaled a slow breath. The wand waved in a slow counterclockwise motion as he whispered the incantation. Susan felt the subtle wave of magic wash over her as she glowed with a pale blue. She saw his brow crinkle. She reached her hand out and touched his cheek tenderly smiling at him and staring into his eyes. "I guess I was wrong. I just felt different."

Harry gulped, "Susan, you weren't wrong - you just turned pink."



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## Chapter 29 – Payback

Ron found him sitting down by the lake. “Hey mate, long time no see. How have you been?” he asked.

Harry had hoped that the serenity of the lake would help take his mind off the burdens that life was pressing onto him.

He smiled at his friend, “I guess I’m doing better. I didn’t want to be in the castle right now.”

Ron nodded.

The Delacours were at Hogwarts, retrieving Fleur’s body for transport back to France. The family was understandably upset. Bill was up at the castle, helping with the final details and facing their wrath, but Harry opted to be elsewhere.

Ron snapped his chocolate bar in half and offered it to Harry as he sat down beside him. “Me either. Do you, you know, want to talk about it?”

“No, not particularly,” Harry replied, absently munching on the bar.

“Good. I’m rubbish when it comes to that crap,” Ron said earnestly.

This triggered a bit of laughter from both of them. The two then sat there in companionable silence eating chocolate.

“So, heard any good jokes lately?” Harry asked

“Did you hear the latest one about the Dark Lord, a goblin and a centaur?”

“You mean the one Justin was talking about?”

“Yeah. You already heard it?”

“Yup. Pretty funny.”

“Where’s the bride to be?” Ron asked.

"She gave me the afternoon off. I think we were making each other mental. I wish I knew what she sees in me," Harry griped softly.

"Harry, lots of birds have been after you for a long time; they must all see *something*. I don't see any 'who's dating Ron Weasley' pools being run. So, have you two decided who's going to tie your knot at the Handfasting ceremony?"

"I left it up to Susan; which made her angry. Which provided me with yet one more good reason for a trip out to the lake."

Ron scratched his chin. Harry noted that Ron had been doing that a lot since he started to get a little fuzz on it. "After watching my Mum go spare over just about every occasion, I think your problem is that you're not acting like you care enough, you know? Women really dig these things."

"That's the problem Ron! I *don't* care. I'd just as soon prefer that Susan and I tie the knot ourselves. Then we get word that Scrimgeour wants to do it, but that might offend Dumbledore. Next, Mrs. Abbott dropped a Hippogriff sized hint that *she* was interested in the job, and then your mum said that she wanted to do it. The papers want to be there and I just want to be married and get on with my life without a circus in attendance."

"All I know is what I see in my family, but it seems to me that families are like a Quidditch team," Ron said seriously.

Harry snorted at such a reference, but Ron waved him off.

"No, let me go with this. Mum is kind of like the Keeper. She's out there directing traffic and trying to shut things down before they get out of hand. Dad is the Seeker, trying to bring home the win, but generally letting Mum run the show. Us kids we're the rest of the team, milling about, causing trouble for our opponents and sometimes ourselves."

"You've lost me," Harry said, looking at him stupidly.

Ron's analogies were built upon a bizarre logic that only he understood and tended to run either towards food or Quidditch. The

time when he tried to explain how scholastic achievement was like a chocolate cake to Hermione ranked up there as a classic mindbender.

“Mum and most women like it when us blokes care about the little things. Like say when you came for a visit to just before the World Cup. Did you really care what my room looked like? No, of course not! You just wanted a place to bunk with clean sheets. To make her happy, I cleaned it up the first night when she said you were coming. I would do a little each night and made sure she saw me doing it. In truth, I could’ve waited until an hour before you came, changed the sheets and shoved all my crap into the closet and you wouldn’t have ever noticed. The first night you were there we had your favorite dessert, but the next night, we had mine; even though that night was supposed to be Ginny’s night for dessert. When you pay attention to the little things, women translate that as caring about them. So telling Susan that you don’t care who ties your knot at the ceremony suddenly means you don’t care about the ceremony and that quickly becomes you don’t care about her. Bloody impossible reasoning if you ask me. You should talk to dad about it. He really knows how to ‘stay involved without getting too involved’. It’s how he gets to spend all that time with all those odd Muggle objects he has.”

“So how are things between you and Hermione?” Harry asked, pointedly not commenting on Ron’s observations, which, to his surprise, made a lot of sense.

“Not so good right now. It’s another reason I came out to talk to you. She didn’t take that whole thing with Tonks well at all. I can handle the little things just fine, but the big ones are still kicking my arse. I’m out of my depth and I could use some help. I know Susan would probably go spare on me for asking you this, but could you talk to Hermione about things? Please?”

“I’ll speak to her sometime.” Harry answered half-heartedly looking back at the water.

“She’s hurting, Harry. Girls aren’t like us. She needs to talk and you’re the one she wants to talk to about it. Females are funny like that. They won’t belch or fart, so they end up wanting to talk and make us just as miserable as they are; barking mad if you ask me.”

"I still don't really want to talk about it," Harry said firmly.

"You know, I read my Uncle Fabian's journal once. He wrote in it during the last war. He said, 'You can't do much about the dead, but mourn them. The only thing you can do after that is to help the living.' I've tried to talk to her, but I just can't find a way to get through to her. She's not going to let it go until she hears it from you. I won't pretend it's easy, but Hermione needs your help."

Harry paused for a moment and Ron realized he might be making some headway. "Ron, I'd probably end up making it worse. I'm no good at talking, let alone to girls. It's sure not helping with Susan right now."

"Yeah, I know. I'm no damn good either, but say this is a Quidditch match. You pull your Beaters off harassing the Chasers and have them terrorize the shit out of the other team's Seeker. Sure you're going to give up some goals, but if your Seeker gets the Snitch you're probably going to win the game."

"Interesting, if I were playing a game, but I'm not."

"Okay, I'll try to pull it out of Quidditch. You go talk to Hermione. You let her vent her feelings and frustrations. You tell her that it wasn't her fault and even if it was you forgive her or at least don't blame her. She feels better and maybe you do too. Then, you go talk to Susan. You tell her that you talked to Hermione. Susan sees that you're helping a friend and that maybe you're trying to work your way out of your own funk. Susan feels better. Tell her that, who ties the knot isn't important. The important thing is the knot gets tied. Even if you don't really feel better, if they feel better the end result is you'll feel better – or at least they'll let up and give you a bit more space – or who knows, maybe we'll both get lucky."

Harry smiled as he mulled it over. "Simple and brilliant. I can probably do that."

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Harry had gone back and fetched the map, promising Susan he would be back in a bit to sort out the Handfasting details with her. The

smile on her face told him that he'd done *something* right. Hermione was out on the grounds, just off the path from the castle to the Owlery. He found her passed out on a picnic blanket with six empty beer bottles and two Muggle romance novels strewn on the grass next to her. He banished the empty bottles and ran through the details of how to perform a sobering charm. The whole situation reminded him vaguely of stumbling on Winky when she'd been surrounded by butterbeer bottles.

"Hermione! Wake up!"

No response. He took a calming breath and tapped his wand on her temple twice and muttered the incantation. The wand still felt a little uncomfortable in his hands. Tomorrow, he was starting back up with Professor Flitwick again. Harry knew there was only one way to get past it, which was getting busy again. He recalled that the reason Flitwick gave up dueling was that he had accidentally killed someone. Perhaps speaking to him would be helpful.

"Rise and shine Hermione!" Harry watched as the girl opened her eyes, no doubt feeling a bit groggy. He waited for her to start to come to. Her eyes opened wide as she looked at him first and then at the empty cardboard container.

"Oh Harry, I uh..."

"Don't worry. I understand. You probably need to be more careful though. Is my sobering charm working?"

"Yes it is. What are you doing here?" Hermione asked massaging her temples.

"Looking for you. Had to use the map to find you."

She looked at him, appearing to be embarrassed. "I put a notice-me-not charm on the blanket and sat inside the magical field. If you hadn't specifically been looking for me, you probably wouldn't have found me. So, what can I do for you, now that you've found me?"

"You've been trying to talk to me for the last few days. I wasn't ready to listen. I think I'm ready now, if you still want to? I'm sorry I pretty

much stormed away from you, but I wasn't ready. It was still too fresh."

Harry paused, waiting for some kind of reaction from her. A moment of silence passed and he decided to continue on, "Also, as Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black, I am here to apologize on my family's behalf for comments made to you by Tonks the other night and by myself earlier in the summer. Ron reminded me how much you're hurting."

"You don't have to apologize to me, Harry." Hermione turned away from him quickly. Although he couldn't see them, he knew that tears were brimming in her eyes. "Ron doesn't know what he is talking about."

"Ron knows more than he lets on, and yes, I *do* need to apologize. Early in the summer, I was angry at you for not telling me about my end-of-the-line clause and I was pretty hard on you. We mostly left it alone and pretended it never happened. That lingered until we had our little blow up when Remus was teaching me how to Apparate. We were able to put that behind us, but then the other night happened. Tonks went over the line, worse than my line about you not coming to help fight the Dementors. It got under your skin more than it should have, partly because of how bad I've been treating you this summer."

"But, the ward map..."

Harry interrupted her. "It's not your fault any more than it's mine! You were used – you believed the adults in our lives knew what they were doing. It just so happens that a number of people were snookered by Snivelus. Mapping the wards should have been safe; after all, the Fidelius charm prevented you from identifying the house. Snape set you up. If I follow your logic, I'm responsible for every murder committed by Riddle since the tournament. Weren't you the first one trying to tell me that it wasn't my fault Sirius died?"

"Yes, but that's circular logic, Harry."

"Well there you go. Listen, you want to admit you screwed up, fine. You screwed up; Bill screwed up. I screwed up. Vance, Jones, Delacour, Podmore and Diggle all screwed up. And, as if I give a shit,

Snape screwed up too! You, me, Bill and hopefully Vance – we get to learn from our mistakes and figure out how not to do it again.”

Harry put his arms around Hermione, which was all it took for her to spin around and start crying into his chest. He pulled her in tight and let her sob. It was there he came to a realization of how right Bill was when he had told him that for the most part Harry’s generation wasn’t ready to fight this war. *‘Hermione is a great witch. She will be a fantastic one in the years to come, but she isn’t prepared for her mistakes costing people their lives.’* Up to this point the only thing that happened when she made a mistake was earning something less than full marks and now she was learning the harsh lesson that less than full marks wasn’t the worst thing that could happen in real life.

Sadly, the rest of his generation reared in the Wizarding World was even less likely to be able to handle it. Their parents fed them stories of how the ‘great Harry Potter’ stopped the evil wizard and made the world safe forever and ever. They coddled their offspring and allowed themselves to believe the lie that it wouldn’t happen again. They were paying for their stupidity now.

He gave her a couple of minutes, letting her soak the shirt he was wearing before stepping back and bringing his hands up to her shoulder. “There, feel a bit better? If not, Ron is warming up another one of his analogies. It goes something like, ‘Forgiving yourself is a lot like two Beaters fighting over a chocolate éclair.’ – or something like that – I wasn’t paying too much attention; if you want, I can go get him.”

Hermione pulled a tissue from her pockets and wiped her face while giving a slight laugh. “No please. Anything but that!” she said, putting the back of her hand to her forehead dramatically. “So, Harry, how are *you* doing?”

“I suppose this is the part where I say ‘just fine’ and then you don’t believe me. So let’s skip it. I’m angry and frustrated. I feel like lashing out for no reason. I’m beginning to wonder if there is a limit to the amount of things the Room of Requirement will let me destroy. I’ll be okay eventually. I have to be.”

“Is there anything I can do?”



“How much have you been drinking lately?” He watched her sag and wondered if she was going to get angry.

For a moment, it looked like Hermione would pass it off as just a rare occurrence. To her credit she pursed her lips and admitted what is happening, “Too much, way too much. I need to cut back.”

“Once school starts, you and Ron are going to need to run the DA. I’ll still be around, but we both know how busy I’m going to be. Just because we’re not spending nearly as much time together doesn’t mean we’re not still best mates. Besides, eventually, with a double end-of-the-line situation, Susan and I are going to have a baby. That baby will need a good witch for a Godmother. Not too many obvious candidates for the job; heavy drinkers aren’t likely to make the cut. I also need you to start looking into ways of protecting the as-of-yet hypothetical baby Potter. I need someone really clever to look outside the norm. They’d probably be expecting what Mum did, so you need to get creative.”

He was crushed into another hug. Giving her a task to make her feel more productive was the best medicine for Hermione Granger; it was how she coped. She needed something to focus her skills on. Harry contemplated telling her straight out about the baby, but it was too early. Most pregnancies in both the Muggle and magical world weren’t announced until the end of the first trimester. Both he and Susan were convinced that the magic surrounding the end-of-the-line clauses would ensure that the baby was carried full term, but they agreed to keep it silent for now. Instead, he decided to lay the groundwork and he had another idea that was more immediate.

“Hermione, do you think you could help me with something today, right now?”

“Of course, Harry. Anything. What do you have in mind?”

“I wanted to go down and see the House Elves. Dobby didn’t really get any kind of ceremony, but I wanted them to know that he was a true hero. Would you mind coming with me?”

“Of course. That’s a wonderful idea!” Hermione said in an excited tone that reminded Harry of more innocent times. Suddenly, she

stopped with a look of discovery on her face. “Harry, we’re not talking about a hypothetical baby are we?”

“You’re a clever girl, Hermione. Draw your own conclusions, but please, keep them to yourself.”

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Neville’s audible grunts continued with each and every crunch he did. Uncle Darius continued to stress the notion that physical strength was linked to magical strength. Someone else was in the Room of Requirement, so he worked out in one of the Charms classrooms. He would do fifty crunches, followed by a set of twenty-five pushups. He would do this for ten minutes and then take a ten minute break. It was exhausting and punishing. He asked about using weights, but Uncle said that toning what he had was more productive than building additional muscle for now. Then he told him that agility and endurance mattered far more than sheer physical strength.

“Hey. Need someone to hold your feet so you don’t move around so much?”

Neville came up to see Ginny Weasley’s face standing in his line of vision. He’d been aware of her watching him for a few minutes, probably trying to decide whether or not to approach him. It may have been Neville’s imagination, but Ginny’s eyes seemed to dart around the room more than they used to. He was angry at himself for lashing out at Ginny after what had happened to Luna. Much like Hermione, she had been careless with information and it had been costly. Like pruning a plant, handling information should be done with extreme caution. Neville understood this now. He wondered why Ginny was here. They hadn’t spoken since he had chewed her out.

“Thanks, I appreciate it,” he said.

The lithe, young witch knelt on his feet to hold them in place. Much better.

“So, you’re trying to get in shape now?”

“Yeah, better physical conditioning; I want to be in better shape next time I run into any Death Eaters. Uncle says that it will help strengthen me magically.

“Mind if I join you? I talked to the Nurse and she said that it might speed my recovery and I won’t get my wand back for a month. My options are limited to working out, Potions, Herbology and Ancient Runes. I can only take so much of them and I need to feel like I’m doing something!” Neville noted how her voice rose in pitch as she spoke. He had lost count, but decided to switch after five more crunches.

“Sure join on in. We’ll switch to pushups in a second. There!”

He helped her adjust her arms to the right position and watched her through the first five, as Neville started in on his next set. “How are you getting by?”

“I still feel like I’m the incredible-fucking-up Ginny Weasley, but hey, what can you do? With all the recent drama, my stupidity seems to have faded into the background, but it’s still there. I feel it every time someone stares at me. Everyone keeps saying it will be fine. My magic will come back strong as ever. What if they’re wrong? What if the shakes never go away? What if I never get better? Shit! I can’t even get angry right, because they have me on calming draughts to prevent accidental magic!”

Neville didn’t say anything. He did wonder what her outburst would’ve been like without the calming draughts. After a time, he finally replied, “I was harder on you than I should have been.”

“Thanks. It’s just that I’ve been feeling like Miss Expendable lately; use me and toss me aside.” She huffed, squeezing out a few more pushups. She turned over and he held her feet still. “Doesn’t matter if it’s the bad guys or the good guys. I’m beginning to think there really isn’t much of a difference. Fucking Chelsea and Hannah screw around with Azkaban level magical crimes get away with a slap on the wrist! Draco’s dad gave me that damn diary and nothing happened to him at all; Draco struts around here all these years and nothing happens, Snape - same damn thing. At least a few of those

bastards are dead now. I'm telling you - justice isn't just blind; it's deaf and dumb too!"

Neville cocked his head and looked at her. "After they got my family and Luna I felt the same way. You know what Uncle Darius said to me? He said 'What do you want and what are you willing to do to get it?' I didn't understand, but then it hit me. Uncle Darius, when he was human, was one of the best Aurors in England. He could have been another Mad-Eye. Hell, he was better at dueling than Dumbledore before he got turned into a Vampire. He lost it all, but he clawed his way back. He told me that there is no justice. If you wait for the Universe, karma, or someone else to take care of your problems for you, you're going to be waiting for a long time. The only one that is going to solve your problems is you. So ask yourself Ginny, 'What do you want and what are you willing to do to get it?'"

Ginny had stopped and was staring at him. "I don't know what I want. What did you finally decide?"

"I decided 'No more.' I'm not going to be a doormat anymore! Someone curses me, there's going to be payback. Someone treats me like crap, payback. I'm not putting up with this rubbish anymore. People will learn that they've got to stop messing with me."

The girl in front of him had a thoughtful look on her face. "That sounds like a good plan."

They continued working out and talking when they took their breaks. He had more endurance than she did. She promised to come back tomorrow. Minutes later he noticed a pair of boots enter his field of vision. He looked up to see the face of his Uncle.

"What did the girl want?"

"Payback, sir. She just doesn't know it yet."

"Help her to learn. It is always useful to have allies with mutual interests. Never fully trust an ally or endanger yourself to help an ally, but if you can provide assistance without risk, then allies can be useful."

"I believe that I am starting to understand..."

Neville felt the icy hands on his shoulders. With inhuman speed, he was snatched into the air and held like a rag doll looking into the angry but dead eyes of Coedus. "No! You do *not* understand. Maybe one day you will truly begin to understand. You have hate and anger. They are enough for now. When you know blind fury and primal rage ... when you know those, then you will begin to understand. Until then, do not presume that you truly understand!"

Neville fought to quench his fear. Fear was weakness! He would not show fear! Clenching his jaws he brought his eyes to meet his Uncle's gaze.

Coedus set Neville down. "You are learning. Go outside and run laps on the pitch. In two hours we will be able to use the room. Come back then."

"Yes sir!" Neville gave a curt nod of his head and gathered his water bottle and stuffed it into his bag.

The vampire watched his great-great-great nephew hurry down the corridor and allowed a thin smile to cross his lips.

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"Draco, I've missed you!" Pansy crooned. "With father in jail things have been so miserable." She smothered him into a hug. The Caruthers' family gathering was a tradition for all the Slytherins.

"Please Pansy, not here. I need to pay my respect to the Baron and his wife." Draco said extricating himself from her grasp.

"Mother is here. Would you like to go greet her?" Her voice dropped to a whisper, "Have you heard from your Mother?"

"I should pay my respects to the host and hostess first, but I will be happy to see your mother after that. I haven't heard from my mother and don't expect to. She elected to - " Draco smiled as he processed Pansy's desperation. With his mother nullifying their betrothal

contract and fleeing the country, they were probably angling to see if *he* knew this fact.

Draco eased his way around her and moved into the parlor.

"Hello, Draco. I was worried you wouldn't be here." Melissa Caruthers smiled at him. Although she was barely five feet tall, she carried herself with an air of confidence. "Father has asked to meet you in the library; he wishes to speak with you in private."

He nodded at her and followed her into the library. "Are you still a prefect?" she asked.

Draco nodded in response.

"Good. I'm Head Girl this year and I'll need people I can count on. I'll send a house elf in to bring you some refreshments and let father know that you are here. It's good to see you. Come find me later." With that the petite brunette spun and walked out of the room.

Draco settled into a leather chair and accepted a drink and sandwiches from the house elf. Ten minutes later Baron Caruthers entered. Draco immediately rose from his seat to greet the powerful man, while wondering what could warrant a private meeting. The Baron was a tall and imposing man, who had once been a professional Beater in his youth.

"I'm sorry to have kept you Draco. It took a few moments to excuse myself. We have been worried about you."

"Have you heard from my father?"

"That is part of the reason I wanted to speak with you," he said, his expression turning grave. "He was slain in the service of our Lord. Please accept my condolences."

The world swirled around Draco for a minute. His father had always been a dominant force in his life. In many ways Draco's actions and thoughts had always been driven by what Lucius Malfoy would think of them. The sudden emptiness was tangible; sadness tinged with pain. In the midst of this pain, however, in the recesses of his mind

there were the stirrings of anticipation. The notion that he was finally free from his father's expectations would not dawn on him just yet, but it eventually would.

The Baron offered him another drink and waited a polite minute to allow Draco to come to grips with his loss. "I apologize for questioning you at a time like this, but have you had any contact with your mother? Her unexpected departure caused many problems for our cause."

Draco shook his head still digesting the news that his father was gone. He wasn't sure how he felt. It wouldn't occur to him for a time how deftly the Baron had used the information. Had he known his mother's whereabouts it is doubtful that he would have been able to effectively lie. "No. She sent me away on vacation before I heard news that Lord Black had voided her marriage. How did father die?"

"I am not privy to the details. I can make inquiries, if you wish."

Draco doubted the answer. The man made his living brokering sensitive information. Draco simmered knowing that he hadn't 'earned' that information yet.

"I want revenge." It was very true, but it also opened the door to find out what the Baron was really after.

"Understandable. Lucius was an extraordinary man. His loss is a tragic blow to all of England. Others struggle to replace the skills he offered. We have similar hopes for you in the future."

"What would you have me do?"

"I will send my instructions through my daughter. We will have various tasks for you to perform. Mostly, we require information. Regrettably, I can not offer you the Mark. Dumbledore is using an outbreak of illness in Ireland as an excuse for requiring health inspections at Hogwarts this year. We are fighting it, but lack the necessary influence with the Board of Governors to block this tactic."

Draco maintained his guarded expression. He was fairly certain of the answer, but he needed to ask anyway, "Who is Lord Black?"

The Baron studied Draco for a moment before answering. "Harry Potter. He voided your mother's marriage at her request. You will need to tread carefully with Potter. He has..."

"He has crossed me for the last time!" Draco shouted.

"Control yourself, Malfoy! As I was saying, Potter has the Minister *and* Dumbledore's full backing. He also survived an attack led by Snape; Snape and others did not survive. Choose your battles wisely."

News of his mentor's death was more stunning than learning that his father was dead. He and the Potion's Master had shared a mutual loathing of Harry Potter that had only grown over the years. Most of Draco's early schemes to get Potter in trouble were at Snape's urging, although after the infamous 'dueling club incident' in second year, Draco concluded that he was being manipulated and used. He'd vowed to let Snape fight his own private war. That lasted only until the end of that year, when his father had been ousted from the Board of Governors. A few caustic words from Potter and his degenerate sidekick and Draco's hatred flared to new heights.

Draco returned his attention to Baron Horatio Caruthers. "You are correct, sir. I will choose my battle carefully, but mark my words, in time, I will exact my vengeance on him!"

The Baron nodded. "I understand your desires. Make your plans, but do not act upon them without my authorization. If it pleases our Lord to allow you to strike, you will be so instructed. Until that time, you will make no moves unless I say so. Do I make myself clear?"

Draco felt the heat of the man's words and rose to the challenge they presented, "I am not beholden to you, Baron. I am the Malfoy."

"I will forgive your impudence; I suppose I must spell it out for you. You are the sole surviving member of the senior line, yes? In a few years, you will take control of the family from your Uncle Tiberius, yes? If you should disappear before then, your Uncle's line becomes senior and he does not have to relinquish power, does he? So ask yourself Draco, 'Who will protect me from my scheming Uncle? Who should I ally myself with to make sure I remain untouchable?' Answer



these questions before you proclaim your independence before the world.”

The news was sobering. His mother had shared a similar concern with him when he had arrived home from school after his father had been imprisoned and she had taken over responsibilities for the Malfoy clan in his stead. “How would you go about that?”

“Your betrothal to the Parkinson girl has been nullified by your mother; rumor has it that you are going to reinstate it. Do not do so; I will make it known that you are among those in consideration for my daughter’s hand. Perhaps you will even impress me enough to be the one I choose for her. A male offspring from the two of you would be well positioned in terms of blood and lineage. Do as you are instructed and you will retain my favor and protection. Act rashly and you will suffer the consequences. Do we have an understanding?”

Draco nodded and shook hands with the man in front of him. The pact between the Malfoys and the Parkinsons was based on a debt his grandfather owed to the patriarch of Pansy’s family. Both men were now dead and there was no further reason to honor that arrangement and every reason to consider this one.

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The ceremony was much larger than he had wanted, filling the Great Hall. The specifics of just what was supposed to happen blurred and Harry did his level best to do his part. What was important and worth focusing on was the sense of happiness coming from Susan. It might be the attraction enhanced by the bond, it could be the secret knowledge that she was carrying his child. Either way, Susan never looked more beautiful to him at that moment. The fact she stuck with him simply amazed him, despite so many reasons for calling it off – including, in Harry’s opinion, common sense. Despite all of this, she had just pledged herself to him ‘without reservation.’ Hearing the conviction in her voice had a profound effect on Harry and he pulled her into a kiss prior to saying his pledge in return. Her expression of devotion to him demanded an immediate response.

Susan couldn't hide the laughter in her voice as she whispered in his ear, "You're supposed to say your line and let the Minister tie our knot first, but I'm glad you feel that way about me."

They broke their embrace to the collective laughter of the assembled crowd. Harry struggled through his lines and his voice sounded slightly strained as he recited his pledge.

He felt the lump in his throat and hoped that his usually light complexion hadn't turned deathly pale as Rufus Scrimgeour officially tied the bow to signify their Handfasting. In the end, Scrimgeour as officiant had been the least objectionable of the choices available to the two of them.

As the ceremony ended, they were faced with a slew of well-wishers. Hugs, handshakes, and kisses ensued. Finally they were led to a table for the feast. Harry found it difficult to eat with his left hand instead of his right.

"Susan, when do we take the knot off? I don't think we ever covered that."

"Traditionally the knot isn't untied until we've consummated things," Susan replied, flashing a brilliant smile. "Why? Tired of being tied down after only a few minutes?"

"No, it's just difficult to eat with my left hand instead of my right."

She grinned impishly at him as she used the fork in her free right hand to spear some potatoes. "*I'm* not having any difficulties. Shall we slip out right now and come back with the knot off? *That'd* start people talking?"

"Oh no! I've married a scarlet woman!" Harry replied with mock severity.

"If by scarlet you mean red headed and happy, then yes, you did" Susan skewered some meat and offered it to Harry.

The meal ended, which let the party begin in earnest. After the traditional first dance, Susan led Harry off to their quarters, ignoring the catcalls.

Before the ceremony, Harry had thought that making love to Susan Potter would be pretty much the same as making love to Susan Bones.

In her intensity, she surprised him.

In the aftermath, as they lay next to each other, Susan carefully retied the knot and placed it into a decorative box on the nightstand, next to the bed.

"I guess I don't have to listen to the 'jump my bones' joke anymore?" Susan said smiling at him.

"I thought you liked being 'my Bones,'" Harry quipped.

"Susan *Potter* sounds much better," she replied.

Harry pulled her back down beside him. "Should we get dressed and head back out there?"

"No, how about we stay here for awhile. I don't think there are any betting pools on how quickly we return to the party."

"I kind of wish there was one; it would mean that Fred was getting better."

Susan placed her index finger on his lips. "Shh. Let's not talk about that today. For one day, let's forget about the war and everything else. Tomorrow, we can worry about all that."

"Just think, we get to do this all over again for the official wedding ceremony at Christmas."

"No, this was just the warm-up; wait until you see what I've planned for that!"

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Eventually, the newlyweds made their way back to the party. Harry shared a few more dances with Susan before they separated and mingled with the guests. He danced with Hermione, Angelina and Mandy Brockelhurst before excusing himself for a drink. He sat in the empty chair next to Bill Weasley. They hadn't spoken since that fateful night at Grimmauld Place.

"Congratulations Harry. Nice ceremony; I was happy to be a witness."

"How's Emmeline?"

"Mending; Madame Pomfrey brought in a couple of specialists. They pumped her full of potions to flush the mind-controlling draughts out of her system. Yesterday was the first time I saw a hint of the old Emmy Vance and not the psycho that she'd been turned into. She's got a long recovery ahead of her. How about you? Are you okay?"

"I'm better, entirely thanks to Susan. I should have been here when Fleur's parents came."

"No. You didn't need any part of that. They were a bunch of angry, foreign pricks looking to blame someone without trying to understand the facts first. I had to remind them that the late Ms. Beaucourt was one of theirs to shut them up."

"The papers say Riddle killed her rather horribly for her failure." Harry said swirling the punch in his cup.

"The papers did say that."

"It wasn't him was it? He's lost too many people lately to go on a killing spree; he's too smart. He'd have done her like Flint if that were the case." Harry said, referring to how Riddle had sent Marcus Flint into Gringotts the morning of the 'Bank Massacre.'

Bill looked at Harry warily. "Seems like she owed a debt and someone came to collect. Me? I'm going to go see if Ginny wants a turn on the dance floor. For tonight, we should be happy that no one we know is fighting for their life." Bill chugged the last of his drink and slammed the glass on the table before standing and moving quickly towards his sister.

Harry had all of one minute alone with his thoughts to ponder Bill's words, before both Dumbledore and Scrimgeour descended on him.

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Wandless and bleeding from the gash in his back, Charlie Weasley stumbled through the vineyard in Southern Greece. The darkness helped, or maybe it merely prolonged his agony. He needed to get clear of whomever was holding the Apparition wards in place. The men were chasing him. What he wouldn't give for a broom right now.

He prayed that Cissy had made it to safety. They had made it this far without running into trouble. It must have been that damn Goblin at the bank. He was too suspicious! They had barely made it out of their rented villa when they ran into a gang of bounty hunters hurling curses at them.

A cutting hex passed over his shoulder as he dived into another row. His pursuers obviously didn't care if he was dead or not. An exploding curse disintegrated the shrubbery and sent him flying through the air. He landed hard and the blow caused his vision to blur. Someone was right in front of him. He saw a burst of green light.

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"Congratulations Harry," Scrimgeour said unctuously.

"Thank you Minister. I'm glad you could find time to officiate."

"It was my pleasure. I was just speaking to Albus and he informed me that you weren't planning on taking the train to school tomorrow."

"We're already here. It seems a bit odd."

"I'll be honest with you Harry. I need you on that train. I'll keep the media circus to a dull roar, but the public hasn't seen you in awhile. You'll have Miss Tonks as your assigned bodyguard for the year and the Headmaster will have several of his staff riding as well. Ten Aurors will be flying air cover. Two squads from the Auror reserves will be on station in Hogsmeade."

“That’s nice, Minister, but putting me on that train paints a big target and puts everyone riding the train at risk. I don’t like it, not for me, not for Susan.” Harry scanned the crowd and saw his bride dancing with Fred Weasley.

Dumbledore interrupted. “Harry in this case, I am inclined to agree with the Minister. The train would be a target with or without you. If there *is* trouble, I’d rather you be there to help protect those in need. Both Filius and Minerva will be there, as will Pomona and Charles Vector. In these troubled times a show of solidarity is more important than ever. I also encourage you to look at it from the view of the average student. He or she would most likely be reassured knowing that you are among them.”

“I’ll do it, but Susan doesn’t have to go.” Harry responded firmly.

“I’ll leave that option open. Have you discussed this with her?”

“No, not yet.”

“Then allow me to offer a bit of marital advice. Allow *her* to make the decision. It will prevent your first quarrel,” Dumbledore said with a slight twinkle in his eyes, a twinkle that had been absent since the death of his brother. “I would also recommend practicing the line, ‘You were right, dear and I’m sorry.’ The more convincing you can make it sound the better off you will be.”

Harry sighed knowing how Susan would react if he issued an ultimatum. He would have to talk to her and convince her that it wasn’t worth the risk. “I’ll take your advice and speak with her.”

Scrimgeour laughed. “That’s the spirit! Best remember that for the future, it’ll make married life more enjoyable, trust me. The next thing you’ll want to do is get yourself a spare blanket for when she steals all the covers.” The laughter stopped as he saw one of his least favorite women approaching.

“Oh ho, I can see the headlines now. ‘Minister advises Potter on secrets to a long marriage.’ Not my best headline, but it’ll do. So, how about a dance with the groom?” Rita Skeeter asked.

“Hello, Rita. I see you made it.” Harry said as she pulled him to his feet and led him away. Harry wasn’t sure whether he had traded the frying pan for the fire.

“Yes, positively wonderful ceremony. It’ll be the talk of the country tomorrow. I don’t suppose while you’re out here you’d mind a few quick questions? I’ll throw a few soft Quaffles your way today. It’s a fluff piece after all.”

Harry wondered just how long this song would last, as she began asking him questions.

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The jet of green light slammed into the large man towering above Charlie, causing the man to topple. Charlie scrambled and dove for the wand clutched in the dead man’s hand. Prying it loose, he turned to face his pursuers knowing that if this was his day to die, he would die on his feet, like a man.

When he looked up, he saw a flurry of spells being exchanged between two men and a platinum haired angel of death. Momentarily he was awed at her grace and skill. Recovering his wits, he sent a detonation curse at the ground in front of the nearest man, spraying him with dirt and rocks. Two seconds later a killing curse struck the dazed man, ending his life.

Charlie was already casting stunners and cutters at the last opponent. He shielded himself against a nasty bone crusher. The raw strength of the spell sent him staggering backwards. Charlie knew he was weak from the blood loss, but Narcissa needed him! He sent a cutter and two reductors at the man dueling furiously with the woman who’d become so entrenched in his life. One of his spells caught the man in the head, killing him. It had been a lucky shot, but much of Charlie’s life had been built on his good luck.

He ambled over to the woman, still scanning the darkness for more enemies. As he closed he could see that she was bleeding from a cut on her leg and there was an ugly bruise on her arm. “I thought I told you to run for it,” he said gruffly.

“Charles, you’re adorable, but you’re a bit of an idiot at times. I’m not Bella, but I am a Black. Perhaps those seeking to harm us have forgotten this and need a reminder. You play by the rules; I make my own rules. Now, turn and let me fix your back and then we’ll find the person doing the wards, I want some answers.”

“You came back for me?” Charlie asked as he felt the wound closing on his back. He drank the blood replenishing potion she forced into his hand.

“I’ve grown accustomed to your company; besides, it takes so long to break in a new man, I’ve put far too much effort into training you already. Well, you’re a frightful mess, but I don’t think anything’s permanently broken,” She answered as her free hand squeezed his bum. “Everything seems to be in working order. Come on, let’s go.”

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“Wotcher, Harry. You going to ask me to dance?”

Harry looked at Tonks; her hair was limp and lifeless. “We need to talk.”

Her eyes flashed red, reminding Harry momentarily of Voldemort. “Is this where you tell me I’ve been acting like a bitch ever since Azkaban and that I need to pull myself together? Save it! I’ve already heard it, several times in fact.”

Harry’s expression hardened, “Good, then I can skip it and get to the part where I tell you that Scrimgeour still thinks you’re my bodyguard. Up until now, I haven’t been too concerned with the people in the castle with the notable exception of the Abbotts. That all changes tomorrow – when this place fills up with students. I need to know right here, right now if I can trust you with Susan’s life. If I can’t, then I’ve got to go get someone else I can depend on. I got you this assignment to give you time to get your head back on straight. Your session channeling Bella for Hermione the other night says you’re not there yet.”

Tonks flinched.



"Yeah, I heard about it. The only reason I haven't gotten a replacement already is you're a friend and you're family. Times up Dora, I'm not covering for you anymore. Come find me when you decide if you're still up for it."

Harry walked off, leaving Tonks staring at him, completely gob smacked.

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"Harry's worried about you. I am too." Susan said, taking a seat after finishing her dance with Fred.

He didn't meet her gaze, choosing to look over at the band. "I'm getting by. It's hard. Every time I look into a mirror, I see *him*."

"I know. We've all lost someone this summer. You and I don't know each other that well, but if you ever want someone to talk to, I'll make the time."

Fred turned and looked straight at her. "Thanks. Everyone looks at me like I'm going to snap. What do they expect me to do, start cracking jokes like nothing happened?"

"No, not right away, but if you don't start cracking jokes sometime, George will never forgive you. He wouldn't want you to do this to yourself."

"Problem is, I don't even know how to start."

"Are you going to reopen the shop?"

"No, Professor Dumbledore is going to give me some space that his brother had out in Hogsmeade and will let me run an Owl-order service. Angie and Alicia are doing the catalog. It goes to the printers this week. Mostly, we're going to be doing the shield hats and cloaks that are on backorder first."

"Here comes Harry. Harry, get over here! Obeying your woman starts now!" Susan shouted, drawing more than a few laughs. She whispered in his ear. Harry looked appalled.

“No! Sorry. Not going to happen.”

“Then I’ll do it.”

“You can’t. Think about it!” His eyes conveyed a sense of urgency to Susan.

“Then I guess you’re going to have to do it. The band is playing it next.”

Fred looked confused, but filed the exchange away for further consideration. Two minutes until he heard the unmistakable beginning to the most dreaded of all wedding songs. Susan pressed a Canary Cream into both their hands with an evil smirk on her face. For even in the magical world there was no escape from ‘The Chicken Dance’.

“I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this. Ready to humiliate ourselves Fred for a good cause?” Harry said popping the treat into his mouth.

For the first time since his brother’s funeral, Fred allowed a mischievous smile to cross his face as he swallowed the treat.

Much to the assembled gatherings delight, Susan Potter led everyone in a rousing rendition of the Chicken Dance, flanked by two giant canaries.

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Dressed in a long-sleeve shirt and trousers, Lord Voldemort surveyed the room in front of him as he tied the black work apron around his waist and pulled on the rubber gloves. The bubblehead charm kept the putrid odors from his sensitive nostrils. Necromancy on a large scale was considered by most Wizards to be completely disgusting work. He relished the work, however; somewhere along the way, people developed the insane idea that he was incapable of doing hard work. Cunning, guile and raging ambition can only get a wizard so far. Often the only solution to a problem was actual labor. The sands of time consumed and discarded wizards and witches who forgot that simple fact.

The remains of his Necrodragon, several acromantulas, the three-headed dog, and the young Norwegian Ridgeback filled the warehouse. He appreciated the irony of Hagrid using the Dragon hatched from the egg *he* had given to the half-breed against him. Odder still was the presence of the very same Cerberus, which was the whole reason for his deception of Hagrid in the first place.

One of the dog's heads was completely useless. He used a severing charm to remove it. With a bit of inspiration, he removed an Acromantula head. It would add a certain aspect of terror that was tangible. He toyed with the idea of removing all four legs and replacing them with ones from the spiders, but it seemed excessive, given the fact that the creature's legs were still intact. Additionally, it would take far too much time and magic to graft the incompatible muscle and bone structure together. It would take away from recreating his Necrodragon.

In silence he toiled, suturing the spider head to the empty socket. Magic would be quicker, but potion-soaked sinew lasted far longer and required less upkeep. In the next warehouse to this, his minions were working to replenish his stockpile of Inferii, including the bodies of all the werewolves who would finally join his ranks, though not as they might have planned. Perhaps a few of his minions were capable of this level of reanimation, but he wanted to ensure it was done right the first time. Besides, he didn't get where he was by sitting in a chair and ordering people about. He was Lord Voldemort. He created Dark Artifacts. He performed rituals others shunned out of fear and misguided morality! It was good to get his hands dirty again.

Going toe to toe with the Ministry and the Order had been costly, very costly. Antonin's flow of recruits had slowed and Penny had barely gotten started.

*'When allies cannot be found, they must be made. I will scale back operations to restock my arsenal. Potter seems to be fixated on the significance of Halloween, perhaps I should send an army of the dead for this year's anniversary? At current production levels and including the eighty already in service, I should have almost five hundred by then. I can use the French Vampires to lead the army. The giants have promised a dozen warriors? They should be here soon. Bodies*

*might be a problem? I'll put Peter on it. He'll keep us supplied with cadavers. He's an efficient little bugger.'*

Voldemort's musings were interrupted by the door sliding open. Peter began to gag. "Milord," the short and pudgy man rasped, "My strike team has returned. I have the pictures. As you anticipated, we encountered no resistance. The wards were impressive, but Mr. Castillo's team did the job for free. Apparently, they have taken an active dislike for William Weasley after he announced their association with our side."

Voldemort floated the pictures in front of him, inspecting them with a critical eye. The flaming wreckage of the Burrow and Peter's smiling face were in several of them. He selected the one with the structure mostly ablaze, the final collapse, and the initial one with Peter starting the fire and doing a little jig. His voice was muffled by the charm as Peter strained to hear. "These three, Peter. Send them to Potter with my letter on my desk. Afterwards, I need you to start looking at ways to increase our supplies of dead bodies and speak with Severus' old contacts about acquiring more of the ingredients required for Inferii." Voldemort handed him the stack of pictures and filled a painter's tray with the first stage elixir. For a normal Inferius, a tiny brush would be used to inscribe complex runes. The Acro-mutt required a larger brush. His wand weaved a simple pattern and the hair on the corpse fell away. It would be reattached later, but by someone else. The Dragon would be more challenging, as some of the scales would need to be carefully removed and then reattached after the runes have been applied.

Peter acknowledged him and left the warehouse before he was overcome by the smell once more. He Apparated back to Headquarters and scurried to the Master's private quarters. Unable to resist, he read the letter sitting on the desk.

*Dear Harry,*

*I would like to extend my congratulations to you and your lovely bride on this joyous occasion. As I have been busy with many things, I have been unable to get out and get a proper gift for you. Instead I*

*asked Peter to go do something nice for the two of you. I must say I am pleased with the result. He certainly has a passion doesn't he?*

*As a bonus, you will find that they have cursed the land. For seven years, nothing will grow in the soil of that property. Just a special treat for dear Arthur and Molly to let them know I am thinking of them as well.*

*Prophecy or no prophecy, I will catch up to you eventually. In the meantime, live your life wondering how I will strike at you next, and just what you will lose. You're never far from my thoughts.*

*Sincerely,*

*Lord Voldemort*

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Harry had survived the chaos on the platform, just how, he was not exactly sure. *'Dull roar indeed, Minister?'* He wasn't pleased that Susan had elected to come. His protests sounded feeble when he voiced them, but at least she'd consented to wear her body armor. Their row last night had been a minor one. She reminded him that she wasn't fragile and made of glass. Harry had simply pointed at her cane.

"Look Harry, if you go and I don't, what are you going to tell everyone who asks 'where's Susan?' People will start talking."

"I'll tell them you're not feeling well."

"After a whole bunch of people saw me laughing and dancing at the party last night? The paper would have a field day with that. They'll say I must have had too much booze and I must be a slag and a lush! Speaking of which, you almost blew it in front of Fred! The only way we're going to keep this secret is to act as normal as possible. Locking me up, in a room, in a tower, is only normal if I am named Rapunzel and my hair isn't that long yet. Harry, I understand you feel like I need more protection, but you're just going overboard."

Coming back to the present, he knew she was right. He was overreacting. So, they compromised. She agreed to take every precaution that he would take himself; so they both had their body armor on, both carried two wands, and two emergency Portkeys. Harry realized that he wouldn't win, so he settled for not losing.

He was pleased that Tonks was here. Not an hour after he put his foot down at the party, she'd walked across the room to Hermione and apologized to her.

They talked for a moment before she announced that was going to speak with the Minister and Headmaster concerning the final details for security tomorrow and gave Susan a hug to welcome her to the family. Harry hoped Tonks was turning a corner. The only thing missing from the Tonks of old was her pink hair and the fact that she hadn't tripped over something on her way to see the Minister.

Dumbledore had intercepted Riddle's 'present' and checked it. Molly had left the room in tears at the loss of the Burrow. Arthur merely looked at the pictures and sighed, saying that it is the people that make the home and not a building on a piece of land. Harry immediately offered him the use of any of the Black properties. Arthur thanked him, but then informed him that Dumbledore had already granted use of Aberforth's property in Hogsmeade for the coming year.

Harry felt like he was on parade again with the constant stream of people passing by the cabin and looking at him. He was genuinely happy to see some people; Lavender and Colin were among the first to stop by. Lavender had arranged to take morning only classes and was complained about having to train a new group of Floo operators for her shift. They stayed only a few minutes before she headed off to find a compartment to sleep in. Hermione and Ron were doing prefect patrols. The uneasy truce between Hermione and Tonks might explain her distance. He was pleased to spend a bit of time with Susan's friends, who were all chomping at the bit to see her. He didn't know Megan or Wayne very well and Ernie was more tolerable than usual. Either someone had said something, or maturity had caught up with the boy. He learned that Susan had an alarming number of fans among the second years Hufflepuffs. They called her

the 'den mother.' Marietta actually dragged Cho in to say hello. He sensed a slight feeling of anxiety coming from Susan at Cho's presence. It disappeared as Susan's Occlumency engaged. He didn't mention it. Cho begged off for her prefect rounds but Marietta stayed for a time to visit.

As he suspected despite Rita's reassurance, the picture of 'the Chicken Dance' graced the cover of the Daily Prophet. The headline 'Potter Fowls Things Up' was followed by an unusually cheeky story. Susan forced him to autograph several copies for the crowd of second years.

Somehow, the train ride to Hogwarts had lost its sense of grandeur for Harry. No longer did it hold the promise of something better. There would be no Quidditch for him this year. While others went to Hogsmeade, he would be working in the Room of Requirements with Flitwick, Tonks, Dumbledore and a host of others. The other students would concern themselves with learning something that might impress the professors. Harry, on the other hand, would be worried about Flitwick injuring him if he wasn't paying complete attention.

Along the way, Harry drifted off to sleep. He awoke to the sound of Tonks' voice. "You are not welcome here, Draco. Leave now." When he opened his eyes, he saw that Susan had her wand out, but pointed towards the ceiling. Tonks was far less diplomatic; hers was leveled at Draco's head. Crabbe and Goyle stood in the hallway.

"I was just stopping by to pay my respects to the war hero, cousin. As you can see my hand is nowhere near my wand." His voice was sickly sweet.

Harry took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. "Malfoy, while I'm touched that you want to continue your tradition of taunting me on the first day of school, I just don't have time for you this year. You're strictly amateur hour; don't try to play with the big wizards, you'll only get hurt. Why don't you sit this year out?"

"What a splendid idea, Potter, you have so much going for you right now – fame, support of the Minister, money, even a pretty little bird to warm your nest at night. I think I will just sit back – so I can watch it

all get taken from you. Unless you planning on beating the Dark Lord with your clever dancing moves?"

Harry was impressed to hear Susan growl in anger. "You know, that's the second funniest thing I've heard this summer, Malfoy. Do you want to know what the funniest thing was? Right after I freed your mother from your late father so she could run off with Ron's brother, do you know what she told me? She said that after she found out she was pregnant with a girl, Lucius made her take potions to make sure you were a boy. But to this day, I'm not entirely sure they worked." He watched Malfoy's anger flare, and then quickly subside. As quickly as he had come, Draco turned and left.

It took a minute for Susan and Tonks to stop laughing. "Did she *really* say that to you?"

"No, I'll have to live with telling a lie, but it *could* have happened and that will really hit him where it hurts; especially after I tell Lavender and Pavarti."

The words came before Susan could stop herself, "Harry! You shouldn't."

"He's had years of spreading filth about me. Time for a bit of payback. I reckon it will be all over the school by the end of the week."

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"For the last time Goyle: it's not true!" Draco hissed. "I have to go check in with the Head Girl for the prefect meeting." He stalked off, leaving his two thugs in the compartment.

"What do you think, Vinny? I think we should tell Blaise. Draco's always giving him shit about having a girl's name?"

"It's funny as hell, if you ask me. Maybe he could be Head Girl next year? I'm gonna go find my little sister. Mum told me to keep her out of trouble."

"Mind getting Lady Malfoy's order from the trolley? I'm going to see if I can chat up Tracey or Daphne." Both shared another laugh at



Draco's expense. Crabbe left and he watched the countryside roll by for a few minutes before sliding open the compartment and lumbered down the hall.

Ten minutes and two rather rude rejections from both the Davis and Greengrass, the insufferable bints, Goyle meandered down the corridor. He had missed the trolley while trying to make some headway with Daphne, but he cracked a smile as he spied his favorite target standing in the line for the loo.

"Neville Lardbottom. How the bloody hell are you doing?"

The pathetic loser had lost a bit of his baby fat. He might actually present a challenge, but Greg saw the fear in his quarry's eyes.

*'No he's still a pushover. Like always.'*

Neville stepped out of line and started walking. "Leave me alone, Goyle."

Greg followed. He expected the feeble twit to duck into a crowded compartment, but the boy kept heading farther back. A smile crossed his face knowing that there was nothing but baggage cars now.

"Look just leave -- Go away." Lardbottom whined. They had run out of cars.

"Make me."

"I don't want any trouble with you."

The words brought back some of Greg's favorite memories involved hassling Lardbottom after Hogsmeade weekends. Fatboy had a sweet tooth and was always good for a chocolate frog or two.

His mark tried to squeeze past him. Greg put his palm into Neville's chest and pushed him easily back into the side of the baggage car. "What did you get from the trolley, Lardbottom?"

"Nothing."

“Right, let me see! Now!”

Greg wasn't really hungry at least for candy. He was just enjoying being cruel. It made him feel alive. He watched in amusement as the bumbling boy reached into his pockets and pulled out some candies. He snatched them out of Neville's hand. “Thanks, Lardbottom. I think I'll enjoy these. Well this one must be new. I think I'll have this one first.” Greg popped the brown one in his mouth. It had a liquid center that tasted kind of like milkweed, of all things. He gagged like it was a bad Bernie Bott's bean.

“Why you little ...” Greg got out the first three words before he felt a burning sensation in his throat and neck. What was happening to him? The little shit who gave this to him was still standing there.

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“What's the matter, Goyle? Didn't taste good, did it? I used a syringe and sucked the cherry filling out. Do you know what I put in there? Distilled gillyweed extract. It's not really as effective as the whole plant. The gills will only last fifteen minutes and you don't get the webbed feet and claws. Oh is something wrong, Goyle? Did you forget to take a deep breath? It's going to be hard to hold your breath for fifteen minutes isn't it? My, oh my you're already looking a bit blue around the gills.”

Goyle staggered backward and stuck his wand to his neck, apparently trying to conjure some water. Only a croaking sound came out and his wand sputtered a few drips of water.

“Oh part of the whole gill thing mucks with the vocal chords so you can speak under water. Sorry, I forgot to mention it. You know, if you worked more on wordless magic, you might not be in this big of a jam?” Neville said casually. His feigned meekness was gone. Goyle sank to the ground, his hands gesturing for Neville to help him. “Your parents are Death Eaters, Goyle. They might have even been part of the group that came and killed my family and burnt our house to the ground. I figured you'd be up to your old games this year, but I didn't expect to get you so soon, lucky me. You're the first, but you won't be the last. Lots of your friends are going to have little *accidents* this year. .”

Neville kept a casual distance as he pulled several pieces of Droobles from his other pocket and began chewing them. Three minutes passed before the gills ceased rising. Neville didn't feel bad. He waited another minute and pulled the large wad of gum out of his mouth and stuffed it down Goyle's throat. He dropped the wrappers next to the body and headed back, hoping that too many people hadn't gotten into the line for the loo. He laughed at his little joke. Most people joked that Crabbe and Goyle couldn't walk and chew gum at the same time. He would need to wait a few days before making that joke. It's not polite to speak ill of the dead, but for Goyle he'd make an exception.

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## Chapter 30 – The Songs Goblins Sing

### *Greece*

By nature, Charlie Weasley was not a squeamish man. One couldn't watch a dragon lay a clutch of eggs or see a cow ripped in two by a Ukrainian Ironbelly without a strong stomach.

He looked at the goblin and the human bound in front of him and then looked over to Narcissa, slightly worried about the dark thoughts that must be coursing through her mind. She had forced the wizard to owl his goblin contact; it didn't take long for the goblin to arrive at the house.

"So, you took someone's money and sold us out," Narcissa began, as if she were berating a child. "They sent a nice little group of thugs to take care of us. I'd like to take this moment to thank you on behalf of any other customers you have sold out over the years."

"You'll get nothing from me, disgusting hag." Snapjaw replied, spitting at her feet. Apparently, appreciation for ethereal beauty didn't cross inter-species boundaries. Charlie was angry, but not nearly as angry as Narcissa.

"Charles, why don't you step outside and keep an eye out for anyone that may have followed our new friend? I don't want you to see this side of me," she said pleasantly

Charlie walked outside, wincing as the trussed-up wizard began to scream. She had warned him that it would probably come to this, but they needed the information about the people after them. If he wasn't so concerned for her safety, he would have put up a silencing charm. After five long minutes the screams stopped and he then heard Narcissa's voice, devoid of her usual charm and cheerful tones.

"Now little goblin, you've just seen what I will do to one of my own. About now you should be wondering, 'If this disgusting round-toothed hag has so little regard for human life, what will she do to me?' This is your final chance to tell me something to save your miserable worthless life. One way or another, you will sing for me, you foul little creature. Tell me all your dirty secrets!"

There was a long period of silence, and then Charlie heard a rasping goblin voice, speaking in a low monotone.

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### *England*

Cho Chang was in a reflective mood as she assumed her duties, patrolling the corridors of the Hogwarts Express. Her return to Hogwarts for her final year of schooling was slightly less than triumphant.

It wasn't just one thing; it was everything!

She had just left the Prefect's meeting with that smug bint, Caruthers. Melissa was such a prissy, vindictive little bitch! What was Dumbledore thinking, making her Head Girl? Probably her daddy's influence, again.

Cho's marks were better. She was on the Quidditch squad and active in two other school organizations. Cho was a much better candidate for Head Girl! The way the 'Head Bint' had greeted her; 'Prefect Chang, how nice to see you again' really got on Cho's last nerve.

She had only been back from Holidays for two days. Her father had all but pushed her around the Alley to get her shopping done. The Alley itself was fairly subdued. She had heard that things had gotten bad while her family was away, but people were acting like there were groups of Death Eaters lurked around every corner.

The latest issues of *Teen Witch Weekly* had been waiting on her bed for her. Imagine her surprise to discover an entire issue devoted to Harry Potter and his handfasting to Susan Bones! The articles contained speculation that they'd been betrothed at birth, or directed to handfast by their respective end of line clauses, and there were even a few rumors that a secret prophecy predicted their marriage. There were few hard, confirmed facts such as Harry's interviews with Rita Skeeter and that Susan had been injured at that awful incident at Gringotts.

Cho wasn't sure what to believe and she also wasn't sure that she had the courage to ask.

To make matters worse, Marietta had practically dragged her in to see Harry and his -- well -- his wife. Cho could barely bring herself to say the word even in her mind. Not that she was still hung up on Harry, well perhaps just a little, but honestly! What had Marietta been thinking? She felt a bit sorry for Susan, which reminded her, when exactly had the two of them happened?

She searched her memory and for the life of her couldn't recall the two of them ever saying one word to each other, or even partnering up during DA meetings. Cho knew that Susan was in for a rough ride, because "romance" and "Harry" were not words to be used in a sentence together, unless the word "unfortunate" was also in that sentence. She doubted that it would last, which was sad. Harry deserved *someone*.

As if this upset wasn't enough, the 'privilege' of being a Prefect had just become the 'chore' of being a Prefect and this during her NEWT year! Patrols were going to be extended from ten PM until eleven. They were even discussing possibility of morning patrol at five bloody AM! Prefects would check in with the Heads and the Heads would check in with the Aurors. It still stunned her that there would be Aurors in the school. Exactly *when* was she supposed to sleep or do her homework? It was tempting to resign, but that would mar her record worse than drooping marks.

Cho knew she was at a crossroads. Her marks were going to suffer unless she quit the Ravenclaw Quidditch team. The lingering question was whether or not she was good enough to get an offer from a team after leaving Hogwarts? Even a reserve seeker would make far more money than most entry-level positions. Then again, it's the scores on the OWLS and the NEWTS that employers really care about, not class standing. There would be a solid month between the end of the season and the NEWT exams. She could make a final push and make up any lost ground during that time. It wouldn't be easy, but then she'd still have a shot at making a team or at least getting on someone's practice squad.

So it was that Cho found herself pondering her future as she moved through the narrow hallways. She was headed to the back of the train first and then she'd slowly make her way forward. The train rides were usually rather dodgy events and wherever she walked people were talking in hushed whispers. There was a nervous energy fueling the train this year. The anxiety was like an inflating balloon.

As she opened the door to the last baggage car for a quick peek inside before heading back, she idly wondered what might just make that balloon pop?

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Neville sat idle, alternating between looking through a defense manual and looking at the sleeping forms of Lavender Brown and Colin Creevey. He was impressed by Brown's new attitude. She was taking only morning classes, so she could work at the DMLE at night. She was doing her part in the war and Neville could recognize that.

He just hoped that *his* contributions would be unrecognized for a very long time. Hogwarts was infested with weeds. If left unchecked, the weeds would grow into Death Eaters. Dumbledore must believe in that 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer,' rubbish. Neville knew the truth. Friends should be kept close. Enemies should be dealt with - decisively. Again, his gaze found the sleeping couple; he arched his neck slightly to sneak a glance down Lavender's shirt. They were careless; Death Eaters could walk in and kill them where they slept without a thought. No, not if he could help it. It was his mission in life. His father and mother had been heroes. Harry was a hero. Now, destiny had asked Neville to take up that mantle too. Stop the spread of evil. Make certain no one else ends up like sweet Luna.

Under his breath, he said a silent prayer to those who would never hear his words. "I'll make you all proud of me: Luna, Mum, Dad, Grams, and all the rest of you. I'll make it right. I promise."

It shouldn't be long now. He had seen Ron's unmistakable mop of hair pass by. The Prefects must be out on patrol by now. Ten minutes, two pages of half-read text and three more long glances down Lavender's blouse before a shrill cry could be heard through the halls. Colin and Lavender were startled awake.

“What’s going on?” Lavender asked, adjusting her rather loose blouse.

“I’m not sure. Someone just went running by screaming. Must have been a prank. The trolley went by, but I didn’t want to wake you two.” Damn! He said too much! It sounded too rushed. He quickly decided to throw Lavender off the track. He wouldn’t look her in the eye. It worked. She tightened her blouse a bit, probably wondering how much of a show she’d been giving him. Neville stood and opened their compartment door. Several others were milling about in the corridor wondering what was going on.

“Make a hole! Make a hole! Back into your compartments with the lot of you! Now!” The booming voice belonged to a man in Aurors’ robes.

Professor Sprout was right on his heels. Obediently, everyone scampered back into the cabins. He saw McGonagall and Hermione pass by. His Head of house kept going, but Hermione remained.

“Until I hear back from the Professors, I need everyone to remain in your compartments. Only Prefects and Heads are allowed in the corridor right now.”

Neville felt sorry for her, as she was immediately overwhelmed with questions from all directions. “I’m sorry. I don’t have any details at this time, but I’m sure the Professors have everything under control.”

He passed the next few minutes imagining what the chaotic scene in the baggage car must be like. He turned back and stared out the window allowing a small victorious smile to cross his face.

The Auror burst back into the train car. He called Hermione to him and handed her a bag he’d conjured. “Collect any food purchased from the Trolley. It could be tainted. Now!”

Hermione stood slightly open-mouthed before she tossed the candy in her pockets into the bag. Neville was concerned. Should he throw a piece of his tainted candy into the bag and really cause a stir? *‘No, the gills would have long since worn off. They’re probably panicking.’* In the end he opted not to. He tossed a few pieces of Drooble’s and a licorice wand into the bag Hermione held in front of him. Lavender



and Colin said they had been asleep and Hermione moved on to the next cabin.

Twenty minutes past before Hermione again reentered the train car. "For the remainder of the trip, everyone is to stay in their cabin. If you need to go to the loo, signal the Prefects or the Professors patrolling the cars and we will escort you. No, I don't have any further information, but I suspect that Professor Dumbledore will make an announcement at the welcoming feast. When we arrive in Hogsmeade, each train car will exit to the platform when directed. These precautions are for your safety."

"What do you think?" Colin asked looking at the two of them.

Lavender shook her head tossing her hair over her shoulder trying not to look worried. "I don't know. If it were an attack, there would be explosions and such. If they don't give us a straight answer at the feast, I'll find out the real story at work tonight and tell you in the morning."

"I'm sure the Professors have things under control, don't you think so?" Neville asked in his meekest voice drawing a look of mild exasperation from Lavender. It was never too early to reinforce his 'bumbling oaf' image.

Two more hours went by with only an infrequent announcement from a Prefect or one of the Heads basically repeating the same instructions. Neville watched their response. He would need to anticipate quick, but rather unorganized response to his actions. One thing that impressed him was the power of suggestion. People had heard the rumor of the tainted candy and now several were complaining of being sick. Flitwick was checking out a couple of second-years in the cabin next to them at the moment. Uncle Darius had explained that this was the 'fog of war'. Neville knew that the most important thing he could do was to act normal. So, he pulled out a book and started reading.

The train rolled to a stop at the Hogsmeade station. Neville looked out the window and saw that a large group of people had already gathered on the platform, including Dumbledore. He watched as the lady who pushed the trolley cart was rather forcefully led away by two

Aurors. A small pang of guilt crossed his mind and he fought to crush it. There was no room for guilt in his life now. His destiny would not be thwarted by such feelings of weakness. Ignoring the twinge, Neville focused on the several small groups of conversations, watching until Dumbledore finally took charge and ordered the students be escorted to the castle.

His uncle had told him that the group mentality was something to watch. As they trudged through the mist and light rain towards the Thestral drawn carriages, he saw a young girl maybe a third-year 'Puff stop and begin retching into the bushes alongside the path. He watched several others become affected by the girl's vomiting. The group-mind was very suggestible. It reacted with base emotions first, like panic and fear. He could use this to his advantage. "Colin save me a seat, I'm not feeling so good myself." Neville walked over to the bushes himself and took several deep breaths. Professor Sprout stopped by and asked if he and the other students were okay.

Neville settled into the carriage, greeting Dean Thomas with a smile and watching him exchange pleasantries with Lavender and Colin. Despite having spent the last few weeks at the castle already, Neville felt a surge of excitement as the convoy of students set forth towards the castle looming in the distance.

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Rufus Scrimgeour had made certain that he would be there to meet the train as it pulled into Hogsmeade. Word had already been sent of the dead boy in the baggage cart. The Goyles are minor quislings to begin with and the boy was of no real consequence. Still, the report that he had choked to death on some candy alone in the baggage car rubbed his instincts the wrong way. Again, he cursed his hindsight. *'More Aurors should have been on the train!'*

"What do you make of it Dumbledore?" he said looking at the old man and then to the train.

"It is most troubling. There's not been a death on the train since the Pureblood riots of 1822. I want to believe that it is indeed a tragic accident, but the events of the summer have left me more suspicious."

"I spoke briefly with Tonks. She assured me that neither Harry nor his wife left the cabin until they were evacuated. I'll have my people stationed at the castle interview the students to see if he had any enemies. Though being a Goyle and a sycophant to the Malfoy boy means that any list of possible suspects would include roughly seventy-five percent of the student body."

The aging, one-armed wizard regarded the tall and heavysset man next to him. "Will you be staying for the Welcoming Feast?"

"I believe so. I have no need to say anything, but a show of Ministry support, especially with these circumstances, should reassure your students. Just acknowledge me during your opening remarks."

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Twenty minutes later, Rufus flanked by his two bodyguards made his way through the throng of bodies in the Great Hall. The tattered Sorting Hat regarded him.

"Scrimgeour, eh? Finally made it to the top of the heap like you always dreamed of. Not quite the view you pictured is it?" the enchanted object growled at him.

The Minister ignored it and took the seat indicated by the one of Dumbledore's staff. It had been many years since he sat on the other side, at the student tables. There were far fewer students now. His school years were after the Second Muggle war, in the decades of peace that followed Dumbledore's defeat of Grindelwald.

Across the filling room, he met Potter's eyes and acknowledged him.

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Harry smiled back at the Minister and turned to Susan. They were sitting at the Hufflepuff table for the Welcoming Feast. "I still don't like what she did either, but that is what we'll have to get used to," Harry said. On the train he'd been talking to Jason Higgins, the young Ravenclaw he'd saved from the dementors weeks ago, when Tonks burst into the compartment and said there was trouble. She then activated both Harry and Susan's Portkeys without further information.

Moments later they were on their bums in front of the Shrieking Shack staring at Bill Weasley and Remus Lupin.

"Harry, some warning from Tonks, or even a bit of an explanation would have been nice before she grabbed us and activated our Portkeys. I guess you're right. It will have to be yet another thing I get used to," Susan whispered back, trying not to sound as perturbed as she felt.

"She was just doing her job, Susan," Harry whispered.

Tonks had met briefly with the Auror on the train before Portkeying to the shack as well. There they learned about the death of Gregory Goyle in the baggage car and what precious little additional information was available at the moment.

It felt odd to be sitting at the Hufflepuff table among Susan's friends. He saw Hannah Abbott sitting near the end of the table. He could see the necklace links of her mind shield around her neckline. She looked very uncomfortable. He felt bad for the girl and a bit guilty for his part in her predicament. However, there was plenty of guilt to go around.

"Looks like they're getting ready to start," Wayne Hopkins said as the doors opened and a group of scared, stricken first year students edged into the Great Hall. All eyes turned to the Hat perched on the stool. Harry listened as the hat began its song.

*Another year has come at last*

*War spreads beyond these walls, like fire burning fast*

*When I sang before, listen you did not*

*In place of unity, only you did scheme and plot*

*So instead of unheeded warnings that I once gave*

*I offer only advice on your life, if that is what you wish to save*

*Vigilance must be constant and on your feet you must think*

*But even the best of plans are like wards with a weak link  
History repeats itself and hatred roams the halls  
Dark thoughts and deeds will endanger you all  
Be not certain of the blinding light  
Make no assumptions of the pitch-black night  
Who joins Godric's house is noble and brave  
But against the reaper, will your courage cave  
Call to those you trust and make a stand  
Or surely you will no longer walk this land  
Those who possess Rowena's wit so keen  
What experience you have remains to be seen  
Use the knowledge you hold for good or ill  
Else wait for the curse that brings your heart to a still  
Of mighty Salazar's brood, will yourself to rise  
Though blind ambition may lead you to an unwelcome surprise  
Cling to the dark or make overtures to the light  
Either way prepare for your part in the fight  
And Helga's stalwart followers, able and loyal  
Victory may still elude you, ignoring all your toil  
Weigh carefully the choices in your head  
Or suffer the consequences when you are dead*

*Step forward younglings and take your place*

*Among those who already are running in this race*

*I fear for you children perhaps more than most*

*Learn quickly your spells or find yourself a ghost*

The song ended to silence. Even the tight-lipped McGonagall looked slightly distraught as she read off the first name.

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After the twenty-three first-years were sorted, Dumbledore stood at the podium and cleared his throat. Harry noted that the Headmaster had chosen a particularly long sleeved robe and it merely looked as if his right arm was by his side rather than missing.

“Welcome to another year at Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft. Our hat has indeed made dire predictions before, but even in the darkest of times surrounding us, we must remember to find happiness and joy. On a more sobering note, I regret to announce there are a few of our students and staff who are no longer with us. Of the fallen, we mourn the loss of Tina Parker, Anthony and Peter Goldstein from Ravenclaw. Katie Bell, Alex Parker, and Rebecca Sargent from Gryffindor, Zacharias Smith from Hufflepuff. Sadly, I must add the unfortunate death of Gregory Goyle from Slytherin to the list. He suffered a tragic mishap during the train ride and we are still looking into the circumstances behind it. I ask your cooperation in any investigation that is conducted. I also ask you to keep Ms. Luna Lovegood from Ravenclaw in your thoughts and join me in hoping for her recovery.”

Harry’s gaze wandered up and down the Slytherin table. They seemed a bit unnerved, which suited Harry just fine. He listened to Dumbledore speak kind words about Hagrid and even a word or two about Snape. Harry took that opportunity to stare at the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall. Susan’s hand slid into his. He exhaled and relaxed as he felt comfort and reassurance in her grasp.

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“And what of the investigation into your son’s death?”

“Milord, I had to send one of my sisters to retrieve his body. They checked her for your mark as you suspected. Gregory’s death has been ruled an accident. I do not believe them! I want revenge!”

Voldemort looked at the angry Tanya Goyle in front of him. He laid a hand on her shoulder in comforting support. “We cannot undo what has been done, my dear. You will have revenge. Go now and be among your close friends and family and remember your child. Let me worry about how to repay those whom you entrusted his care.”

She bowed to him and walked away.

Georgina Crabbe met her at the doorway and led her out of the central chamber. He waited a respectful minute for the pair of them to get out of earshot before turning to the woman and three men at the table. “The boy’s death remains suspicious regardless of Scrimgeour and Dumbledore’s claims. We should make use of this,” Voldemort rumbled.

“What is your will, Milord?” the woman asked.

“It’s time for you to get your own personal revenge, Madeline. The man who put you in Azkaban, our former Minister, he is yours. Mulciber, Rookwood and Lestrangle, the three of you are to accompany her. Fudge has long since outlived his usefulness. Do not set the Dark Mark above his dwelling. Do not use the killing curse. Kill him and his family violently.”

He saw the gleam in the woman’s eyes as he granted her fondest wish. “Do be careful, I hear he has hired several bodyguards. I shall be paying someone else a house call,” he said, smiling for the first time.

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“*Alblato!*” Harry erected a hasty reflective shield slapping the incoming curse aside. He responded with a blinding curse and a stunner. Four days into the school year and Harry knew his training was actually regressing.

“That’s enough, Harry. It’s time we had a talk.” Flitwick said commanding the Room of Requirement to provide a bench. “Sit down.”

Harry wiped the sweat from his workout away with a towel. His dueling instructor handed him a flask of water and opened his own, taking a drink.

“Harry, you’re making some progress, but it seems like you’re just going through the motions.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

Flitwick’s face took on a brief look of humor. “I’m a teacher, Harry. My job is to answer questions. Go ahead, ask away.”

“How did you handle it? Killing an innocent?”

“The man I killed was far from innocent. He was a professional fighter from what used to be Serbia. I’d been fighting for a dozen years by that time. I didn’t need the money. I never really did. I fought for *respect*. Respect I was never given because of my height.

And so, I had a grudge match with the Serb. We had fought three times before. I had won twice and he prevailed the third time. He started the rumors that the ‘Mighty Midget’ was now a fading star. The fourth time we fought was nine months after that. I went into the match angry. It was stupid. I felt like everything I had ever achieved was worthless – like I was back here as a student in my last year, still being mistaken for a first-year. I was careless and over emotional with my spells and it killed him.”

Flitwick took a long swig from his water bottle. “That’s when I knew I was fighting for all the wrong reasons. Some teacher I am. It took me twelve years and the death of a man to realize that I was never going to win what I really wanted from someone on the other side of a dueling pit. I stopped fighting and stopped living with that burning need to prove myself. I went and found something that made me happy. Do you want to know what I make my Patronus from? The look of joy I see when a bunch of kids levitate a feather for the first



time. I killed someone unintentionally out of anger and my own arrogance. Why did you kill someone Harry?"

Harry opened his mouth to answer, but couldn't find the words. After two false starts, the only answer he could come up with was, "I was just trying to stay alive."

"There's your answer then. Don't ever fault yourself for staying alive. Now are you ready to put in some real effort, because if not, I can get Tonks in here if you're just going to keep up this mediocre performance? I've got other things to do, you know."

It was probably no different than Susan's words to him, but this time it seemed to stick a bit more. It was war out there. Innocents are going to die. The Charms master's words didn't instantly heal him, but it was a start.

"Okay, I'm ready. Let's get back at this. Dumbledore said he would be by soon. He wants to start working on controlling my Animagus form."

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*'Sometimes, waiting to kill someone is so dreadfully boring.'* Voldemort thought as he sat in the oversized chair. The group he had monitoring the target's movements had been wrong when they assured him that she would be home twenty minutes after he arrived. They would suffer if they did not have an acceptable explanation.

For the first ten minutes, he busied himself destroying portraits, killing the house elf, and looking for anything within the house that might raise some kind of alarm. It was a fatal oversight of the homeowner not to have removed Helen Edgecombe from the list of people authorized to Floo into this house. She had escorted him there and left just as quickly.

As he surveyed the décor of the house, he decided that what he was about to do was not murder. It was a public service to all those with a modicum of taste.

The Floo changed colors and out stepped the form of Delores Umbridge. Voldemort stirred from the chair and removed the disillusionment charm hiding him.

“Hello, Delores. I’ve been meaning to make your acquaintance.”

Madame Umbridge dropped her packages in front of him. He got that a lot. In fact, the look of abject fear on a victim’s face was one of the perks of the job. It’s not like people would look upon his face and say, “Oh Lord Voldemort, you shouldn’t drop by unannounced. The place is such a mess. Would you care for a spot of tea?”

“Wwwwwhat do you want?”

“I’m here to raise awareness about speech impediments. As you seem to have one, I thought we should have a discussion.” Voldemort laughed internally at his private joke. Seeing that his victim was not able to understand his joke he continued. “I need your assistance Delores Umbridge.”

“How did you get in here? My wards?”

“Does it really matter how I got here? How very bureaucratic of you, already looking for someone to blame. I hate bureaucrats. I understand that they are a necessary evil. I suppose in that respect, I would be an unnecessary evil, wouldn’t you say? The correct questions you should be asking are ‘What do you want?’ or ‘Will the Dark Mark be floating over my house in the morning?’ or ‘Are you going to spare me?’ Try asking those instead.”

She waited for a second before asking quietly, “What do you want?”

“Ah! Now, we are getting somewhere. You still have a bit of a powerbase left in the Wizengamot. It’s a shadow of its former self, but added to my current voting block, it would be sufficient. I want the support of your allies.”

The woman in front of him finally seemed to find her backbone. “I’ve no love of Scrimgeour. The man is trying to appoint me to be the Ambassador to Russia.”

Voldemort felt a pang of pity for the Russians and added them to the list of people who really should be thanking him. "Indeed. Rufus is not really hiding his attempts at consolidating his powerbase and marginalizing his enemies. He is the political equivalent of a bull in a china shop."

He could see her recovering some of her confidence and composure. "So, you want me to throw my backing behind Caruthers and Sykes. What are you offering in return?"

"Well, I'll answer the second question and tell you that the Dark Mark won't be flying over your house in the morning."

Umbridge seemed to relax. At least as much as a quivering mound of flesh like her could. To think that people called him repulsive! "My life is worth quite a bit to me, but as of late your side seems to be losing ground. My life, my monies and my political clout are worth a bit more than that. Perhaps you should consider making a better offer?"

"Oh dear, I seem to have given you the wrong impression. I just want your allies. You, I have no interest in." Oh that brought about the return of the quivering.

"Why do you expect my allies to follow you if you kill me?" She was getting a bit shrill now. He kept his eyes on her wand hand.

"Because, you fat swine, no one is going to know that I killed you. More than one of Harry Potter or Rufus Scrimgeour's enemies are going to die this evening. It will look like your adversaries are doing a bit of old fashioned purging. Your death will look like more of Scrimgeour's handiwork." He blew her wand out of her hand with practiced ease.

"No! Please spare me! I'll do anything," she bleated, her fat hand going to her heaving bosom. The last sentence sent chills up his spine. Voldemort was used to hearing that from females, and while sometimes he would let his mind wander slightly when he heard that, from her the suggestion was unthinkable!

He reached into his robe and pulled out a blood quill. "Delores, I'd like you to write an overdue apology to young Harry. After that, you are

going to die. It will be violent and nasty, I'm afraid. Potter and Scrimgeour's backers aren't neat or tidy are they? Would you care to do this with or without the Imperious curse? Sorry, that was a rhetorical question. *Imperio!*"

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"Have you decided what your NEWT project yet, dear?"

Neville looked up from the cluster of Herbology texts that sat next to him and smiled at Professor Sprout. "Not yet, Professor. I'm still looking at inter-species cross pollination issues. I was looking at the works of Jorge Garcias in Costa Rica in the trade journals. I'm considering contacting him for some clippings. He's actually trying to breed a sunlight resistant strain of Devil's Snare," Neville said, trying to simulate the appearance of earnest interest.

The topic, in fact, was the only thing that had even mildly caught his interest. The joy that all these plants once brought him was still there, but it seemed different; changed in some manner. Herbology had been what Neville was good at; he'd let it define him. He was the Herbology guy. It had worked for him for five years, but now it was different.

The doting old woman in front of him smiled. "That sounds magnificent! Greenhouse Nine has been fallow for the last year. It needs a bit of upkeep, but you could it's yours, if you want to use it," she offered.

"It's a little big for just a single project like that. I'm not sure that I would be able to contribute to his work," Neville temporized. He felt a tremble of excitement at having his own private place amongst all these students.

"Grow whatever else you want. I can assign you a house elf if you'd like."

That really caught Neville's attention. "Well that would make things much easier, Professor. Thank you."

The excited smile on his instructor's face was his answer. She called out to one of the many house elves that helped her maintain the greenhouses. "Bessie, this is Neville Longbottom. You will take instructions from him for the school year."

Neville continued to make small talk with Professor Sprout. She had just helped him in ways that she would never know. Indeed, this was a fortunate turn of events. He had been worried about his 'weeding' with all the new precautions that the school was taking. He needed an assistant and he wasn't sure that Ginny was willing to really get her hands dirty - yet.

He'd thought that he would have to lay low and carefully plan out his next accident.

He led the elf into the vacant Greenhouse Nine. "Professor Sprout has assigned you to me."

"Yes. Bessie is good elf. Tell Bessie what to do and Bessie will do."

Neville glared at the elf in front of him. "Good. You will not tell anyone, not even the other elves what you are doing for me. If you tell anyone, then Bessie is not a good elf!" He watched the elf cringe and hop up and down in protest.

"Bessie is good elf! Bessie is good elf. She tell no one!"

"I know. Bessie is a great elf! Now here is what I want you to do...."

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## Chapter 31 – Complications

September 9, 1996

Logan Travers was the 'runt' of the litter. Of the five Travers brothers, he was the smallest and youngest. He was also the only son sorted into his father's old house, Ravenclaw, amongst a gaggle of Slytherins. His mother had been a Jugson.

He banked his new Nimbus 2001 into a series of tight turns in the early dawn light. It had been a rough summer for his family. His oldest brother died while taking part in a Death Eater raid. The new Minister had been causing legal problems for his family, claiming that they were allied with the Dark Lord, an allegation that, as of yet, was unproven. The only reason he had this brand new broom was that his parents had bought it for him when they had worried that their vaults might get frozen. They wanted assets that could be easily liquidated and a good broom like this was not likely to lose much of its value.

His old broom was a Cleansweep Eight. The Nimbus was a massive upgrade and his flying skills were definitely rusty, by as his father said, 'It would be a shame to let this go to waste. Perhaps you should try out for the Quidditch team.'

He spoke with Chang and Corner about it. Corner was skeptical of adding a seventh year, who'd never played with the team before. Still, a fast broom like this one got their attention. They told him that tryouts would be in late September and that if he really wanted it, he would need to fly extremely well.

Which explained Logan's presence out on the pitch, flying in circles. He had always liked chasing.

The broom suddenly jerked violently. He struggled to keep it under control. It yawed hard to the left and dropped five meters in less than a second. He felt his panic rise as it became harder to hold on. He'd heard stories of defective brooms before. There had even been that incident with Harry Potter in his first year.

Logan didn't exactly have the time to analyze the possible causes of his current problems. It was becoming more difficult to just hang on,

as the broom refused his mental commands and continued to fight with him. With a particularly violent buck, he was thrown off the broom and began falling. He was over twenty meters off the ground!

He pulled his wand out of his holster to cast a cushioning charm as he twisted through the air. He spared a second, to take a calming breath before bellowing the command to invoke the cushioning charm at the ground below him. No doubt it will hurt, but Logan had faith in his magical prowess. He hoped his family wouldn't be too hard on him having such an amateur accident like this.

Just as he was about to hit, he heard a voice, "Finite Incantem!" and the magical field of energy waiting to save his life vanished. He had no time to process this as his body completed the lethal fall and hit with a sickly thud.

From his disillusioned vantage point by the bleachers, Neville braced himself against the support beams. He'd been practicing the broom curse in the Room of Requirement and it took a tremendous amount out of him. He barely managed to cancel out his target's cushioning charm in time. The Ravenclaw made a good target. Too many Slytherins dying at once would raise too much suspicion and one of his brothers had participated in the attack on his house.

Neville resisted the urge to inspect the body. Instead, he headed back towards the lake for his morning run. He cancelled the disillusionment charm as he sat on the rock and waited for Ginny to arrive for their morning run. He had Bessie, the house-elf, following some of his future targets around, learning their habits. He already had two more promising leads: Pansy Parkinson's frequent trips to the Prefect's bath through the hallway devoid of any paintings and Daphne Greengrass' rather frequent trips at the Astronomy Tower with several different boys. Both were from families led by marked Death Eaters and they'd each made their sympathies clear.

He pondered the fates of the blonde and the brunette while watching the redhead approach him.

"Hello Ginny. How are you feeling this morning?"

"Sore everywhere, but all this should pay off for Quidditch season. Heck the way you're going, you should try out for one of the Beater slots. Kirke's about worthless, which isn't saying much about the other guy either. Looks like a nice day for flying. I'm going to take a spin later, do you want to come?"

He smiled at her, "I don't know about that; I'm not much good on a broom. I'd likely fall and break my neck or something. Come on, let's get going."

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Harry had actually been moderately impressed with Conrad Dawlish. He had floated into the classroom on his magic carpet and hadn't made any effort to hide his missing legs. Unlike most other classes which were combined due to low enrollment at the school, Defense and Charms were still split because of their popularity. Dumbledore opted to forego traditional pairings and instead place the Gryffindors with the Hufflepuffs and the Slytherins with the Ravenclaws. All the other classes combined classes from all four houses.

When Dawlish had the attention of the room he began in a loud voice. "I'll never walk again, because I wasn't fast enough and my shield wasn't strong enough to stop a powerful cutting curse from the one we fight." His eyes locked onto Tonks in the back of the room. "Three others went with me that day and tried to take him on. Only two of us made it out alive. Well, if you look at me, one and a half of us made it out alive. Alastor Moody was the one that lasted the longest against him and he was a legend among the Aurors. So, is anything I'm going to teach you going to stop a Dark Lord? No, probably not. If you go up against him, bring help - lots of help. But Voldemort's not the only problem out there. He's got followers: he's got Inferii, Werewolves, Acromantulas, Vampires, Dementors, Giants, Trolls and even this undead thing that used to be a Dragon, although, I heard that got destroyed. Take away all his followers and creatures and he's a powerful wizard, but a powerful wizard by himself can be beaten by a group of lesser wizards or witches who know how to work together. Your Charms Master, working with a group of others, gave as good as they got. Most escaped without serious harm. See that witch in the



back of the room. She's the reason no one will ever fear the name Bellatrix Lestrange again."

Tonks shifted uncomfortably under all the stares directed at her. She had asked Dawlish not to mention that. He had blatantly ignored her. They had never run in the same circles, with him being Fudge's personal bodyguard. Dawlish had a reputation as a technician, who prized flawless technique above all else.

Dawlish was again floating around the room. "I'm not going to turn you into living-death-with-a-wand. What I am going to do is make certain by the time you leave my class, you are competent spellcasters. It's one third of what will keep you alive in a fight. The next third is keeping your wits about you and not panicking. I can't teach you that. The last third, well that's Lady Luck and she's fickle. You can never count on her or the price she will make you pay."

"So, we're here to learn. I'm going to give you a list of the creatures you'll be questioned about on your NEWT exams. We're going to pay special attention the creatures known to be in his army. I'm still working out the details, but Professor Dumbledore knows a friendly giant, or at least one that is a bit less violent than the rest. We're gonna see him up close and personal next week, just so you can really see how imposing one can be. Most times it takes four or five witches or wizards working together to take one down. They'll laugh off a single stunner. You might find your best cutting curse is but a mere paper cut to a Giant. I want two feet of parchment on Giants and their weaknesses the day before our next class. In the first part, I want to see a discussion of the Ministry prescribed methods for dealing with a Giant. In the second part, I want to see if you can think, instead of just parroting a standard reply. There is a difference between knowing an answer and understanding an answer! Next week, we meet out by the lake and you will get an idea of what it's like to be staring down a Giant from the other side of the battlefield."

Harry, Ron, Susan and a few others knew he was talking about Grawp. The rest of the class was already muttering and looked a bit frightened. Dawlish was speaking again. "On the subject of spell work, I will tolerate no foolishness in this classroom. Watch what happens to the first one of you that I catch playing with your wands. Offensive

spells will only be cast with supervision. For the moment, the only defensive spell you may practice without supervision is your shield charm."

"We will mix defensive and offensive work. I see that the quality of the education here has been a mixed bag for the past few years. For the rest of the day, I will be assessing your basic skills. I want four of you, actually if you would assist Ms. Tonks? Good, I want six of you at a time. On my command, I want to see your shield charm."

Dawlish paused and pulled out what looked to be a second wand. "Aurors have a training tool called 'the Prod.' See this stick. It's got a stinging hex permanently enchanted on the end. If your wand work is sloppy, you get to feel the Prod. If you aren't concentrating, you get the Prod. If you piss me off, guess what? You get the Prod. Assuming you pass muster, there are a group of targets at the end of the classroom. You will demonstrate a properly cast stunner, followed by a Reductor curse to the satisfaction of Ms. Tonks. Afterwards, you will use the Reparo charm to fix your target for the next group of students. You will then return to your seats and think about how much work you need to put in on your basic casting motions if you hope to survive a fight. When I call your group again, we will work on a different group of spells or the same ones if I feel that you don't pass muster. First row up to this line! Wands at the ready! Move it! I do not repeat myself!"

Ron leaned over to Harry and whispered. "He's a bit hardcore isn't he?"

"Yeah, but he needs to be. I watched the fight he had in a Pensieve. His technique was perfect, yet Riddle's spell blew right through his shield. I'd say he paid his dues."

Three of the first group of six got a dose of the pain stick after their first casting. Harry could see the flaws in two of the three, but missed the third. He made them recast it twice more and only Wayne Hopkins escaped the instructor's wrath. He watched Hannah Abbott wince in pain. A quick glance around the room saw several practicing the motions already.

That row was dismissed and theirs was called. Harry had Susan on his right and Ron on his left. On Dawlish's command, they cast. The crippled Auror's eyes moved up and down the line, dissecting their performance. He floated next to Megan Jones. "Not enough snap in the wrist, right here!" He stuck the tip of the prod on her wrist and she yelped. Sally Perks got the same treatment, but for a different reason. He eyed the rest of them and nodded in approval. The second casting resulted in Megan and Ron getting prodded. After the final casting, which everyone passed, Dawlish floated next to Harry.

"I'm going to be especially tough on you, Potter. I know you have shown more potent shields, and we'll touch on those later, but right now I want to see you cast this shield correctly while I use the prod on you. When I say cast, you cast."

Dawlish whacked the stick into the back of Harry's leg and held it there for three seconds before shouting, "Cast!"

"Good. Your technique doesn't breakdown under duress. Take a deep breath and we'll do it once more. Mrs. Potter your hand, if you please?"

Susan reluctantly held her hand out. Harry's eyes narrowed, looking dangerously at Dawlish. "Now Mr. Potter, when I say cast, you will perform a perfect Protego. Ready?" He put the prod directly into Susan's palm and held it for two seconds and bellowed "Cast!" Harry's shield flared powerfully and crackled with energy as he stared defiantly back at his instructor. Dawlish shrugged and floated next to him and whispered in his ear.

"Good. You won't be able to help her if you can't help yourself. You'll likely hate me before the end of the year. If you don't, then I haven't done my job." He then dismissed them and shouted for the next row.

"I'm okay, Harry. Don't get your knickers in a twist," Susan assured him, flexing her fingers as they moved over to the area where Tonks stood.

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It was lunchtime, when Harry learned that a Ravenclaw student had died on the Quidditch pitch. The Claws were understandably subdued. Classes were immediately cancelled for the rest of the day. Harry expected to have his lesson with Flitwick cancelled, but it wasn't.

Both Susan and Tonks accompanied him to the Room of Requirement. Inside, he found Professor Sinistra, Fred Weasley, Dawlish, and one other Order member he vaguely recognized.

The attractive Astronomy witch smiled at him. "Mr. Potter, I've missed you in my classes this year. Filius asked us to come here this evening and widen the variety of opponents you face. Hopefully, you will find this experience educational."

Harry started off against Fred, who proved to be eager, but not really much of a challenge. Under normal circumstances, he would have played with Fred longer, but he knew that the other three were studying him, looking for weaknesses. Fred's form had slipped a bit since the DA, he was very rusty. He helped Fred to his feet after immobilizing him. "Fred, you try too hard to be too clever. Think less, cast more."

Dawlish floated onto the dueler's platform. "Now, I can truly see what all the fuss is about, Mr. Potter."

With that, he began firing spells rapidly at Harry. Harry was hard-pressed at first, but his superior mobility ended up carrying the day. The other man reawakened Dawlish and helped the man back onto his magic carpet.

The stocky man was next. He introduced himself as Kyle Torkelson. Harry quickly understood the man's style was defensive in nature; he focused on his shields and stuck to using basic disarming, stunning and binding charms without much in the way of variation. It was a duel of attrition as Harry overpowered his opponent's staunch defenses, suffering only a hit by a weak jelly legs jinx that was easily countered. Still, it was a solid workout and both were panting by the time Harry managed to bring him down.

Mr. Torkelson shook his hand rather vigorously, "Well played Mr. Potter."

Harry smiled back at him, "Thank you. If I may comment, you might want to focus on your offense a bit more. Death Eaters often use spells that can't be blocked. Your shields are good, but you can't count on blocking them all."

Finally, his former Astronomy instructor stood facing him. She was lithe and fast. Her spells were quick. It reminded Harry a bit of his exchange in the Atrium against Bellatrix.

She also clearly wasn't restricting herself as Harry swatted away a cutting curse and a piercing hex. They were slightly underpowered, but would still draw blood. It merely demonstrated the level of control she had over her magic as she followed with a strong stunner, trying to overwhelm his shield. Apparently, teaching Astronomy left her with substantial free time during the day and she made good use of it.

Still, Harry had an ace up his sleeve. Professor Sinistra was known to loathe spiders. He recalled one particular incident in his third year with substantial humor. Knowing her phobia rivaled Ron's, Harry snapped off a *Tonare*. The blasting curse was rather loud. He knew she would either dodge or shield. It didn't matter, as he was looking for the sound to cover his next spell.

"*Invito Arachne Colossus!*" Harry tried to keep his conjuration as quiet as possible. Sure enough, a spider the size of his broom appeared and began quickly advancing on his teacher. A moment of paralysis later, followed by two Reductors and the spider was rendered a steaming mass of flesh, but the distraction allowed Harry to bind and silence her. Harry chuckled as he recognized several very unladylike words she was mouthing as he removed her bonds and dispelled the silencing charm.

She regained her composure quickly and spoke in a dry tone. "Your spell choice was in rather poor taste, Mr. Potter."

"I'm aware of that, but as the Headmaster would say, you should strive to overcome irrational fears."

"I see. Very well, next you will fight us two at a time. Filius has mentioned that you need to start working against multiple opponents."

Mr. Torkelson and Mr. Dawlish, I believe you gentlemen would like a rematch.”

The room reconfigured itself into a more open arena rather than a dueling platform as Harry gathered his wits to him and prepared for a fight. Already Fred and the Professor had their heads bent together. No doubt they were discussing strategy. She even looked at Harry and gave him an evil smile. Harry gulped knowing he was going to be repaid for that giant spider...

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Sometimes, Rita Skeeter wondered why she chose this line of work. For what seemed like the hundredth time in the last five minutes she wondered what else she could have done instead of being a journalist. She wouldn't be waiting around this vacant dump called Spinner's End, if she was a musician would she? Everyone had always complemented her on her lovely singing voice.

Her introspection was interrupted by a cloaked figure who opened the door and entered the room.

“Ah Baron Caruthers at last, I was beginning to wonder if this was payback for the Minister's Ball a few years back? I had a legitimate source for that story,” Rita said sweetly.

The man removed his cowl revealing his pale face and somewhat serpentine features. “I'm afraid the Baron will not be joining us this evening. He is unfortunately indisposed. I hope my company is a suitable substitute,” Voldemort said with a hint of a smile.

Rita stood frozen for a moment before Lord Voldemort shrugged and continued. “Please sit. No harm will befall you unless you reach for your wand. You did after all, come for an exclusive interview with a powerful wizard. I apologize for the ruse, but I doubted that you would have come otherwise.”

“People know I'm here.” She said slowly.

“Should they make a foolish error in judgment and come, the people who know I am here and are waiting outside would most likely kill the

people you know. Let us hope that it does not come to that, shall we? Now, I suppose you have some questions for me? Please let us at least be comfortable? You'll notice I have not placed any Apparition wards up. You are free to leave at anytime, but you won't, will you? I have never granted an interview before. So, we have ourselves an experiment. Which wins out - curiosity or fear? Please join me for an exclusive interview. I have a quill and parchment waiting for you."

With a wave of his wandless hand, the table shimmered and the previously empty table now had a sheaf of parchment, quill and ink jar waiting for her. There was never any doubt as Rita sat down and picked up the quill.

-----

By dinnertime four hours later, Harry was in better spirits even after losing several of the two-on-one duels. He was proud that he had managed to win one of the four where he fought three opponents simultaneously. The most underhanded trick Sinistra had up her sleeve was having Tonks and Fred slip out for a minute during the second duel with Dawlish and Torkelson. When Fred returned it was really Tonks. It took him a minute to discover the ruse. It was a very costly minute, as he suddenly found himself defending a barrage of spells. Susan hadn't thought it was very sporting, and made no secret of it.

At dinner, Harry knew he was in trouble as Parvati made a beeline towards him and Susan at the Hufflepuff table. She had clued him in about the rumors circulating about him and Susan. He was actually quite grateful. The most alarming one was that Scrimgeour had Umbridge killed as part of a deal with him, or that vigilantes set on avenging Harry's good name were out there killing people who had wronged Harry in some way. One look at the Slytherin table was all that had been required to know where this whispering campaign had originated. Parvati was quickly becoming his unofficial press secretary. He wondered what news tonight would bring.

Parvati sat down in front of Harry and Susan during dinner. "Harry, I just heard the most awful lie was being spread about you?"

From a girl who took her gossip as seriously as she took her Divination, this was a dire warning indeed. "What are they saying this time?"

"That the boy in Ravenclaw, the one who fell from his broom, saw you killing Goyle on the train. I told them that it was utter rubbish."

"Thanks for telling me. I haven't been outside all day."

"Just so I can refute this, where were you at six-thirty this morning?"

"Um, I was probably in the shower about then." Harry looked to Susan for confirmation.

She nodded and smiled back at him blushing slightly.

She winked at Parvati and said, "I believe that's where we were at the time."

This left the gossip queen momentarily wide-eyed and speechless, providing both Harry and Susan with a good laugh later that evening. The most amusing rumor was that they were throwing sex parties for both Gryffindor and Hufflepuff in their private suite.

Harry's course load was extremely light. Under other circumstances, he'd probably be facing the wrath of Hermione for only having three courses. He only had Potions, Transfiguration and Defense. His dueling lessons with the Charms Master would cover his Charms work, albeit at a ridiculously accelerated rate.

The next morning, Harry sputtered, blowing hair out of his face. The only downside to being married to Susan that he had discovered to date was that her hair would on a life of its own during the night.

"Morning sleepyhead, are you ready to face another day?"

Susan grunted at him and burrowed under her pillow. She had two morning modes: frisky and comatose, with nothing in-between. It was fair to say that she wasn't a 'morning person'.



It would be strange today. The first ever Potions lesson without Snape. Last week's class had been cancelled, while the Ministry responded to complaints about a 'Dark Creature' teaching their children. He morbidly wondered where were these protests last year when they had Umbridge? Harry didn't have a problem with Coedus. He regretted that the events that ended the summer had prevented him from forging more of an alliance with the Vampire. The fifth-years had already had him last Friday and were suitably scared of him. Colin had complained that he was harder than Snape, but without the favoritism. Harry was somewhat pleased to see that everyone was getting the same treatment from the Vampire.

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The aforementioned Vampire stood in his private quarters with his relative. "You would tell me if you knew anything about these mysterious deaths, wouldn't you Neville?"

"Of course, I would Uncle."

"You lie!" Neville again found himself lifted effortlessly into the air and pinned to the wall. "Do you think I am an idiot! Do you think I wouldn't notice someone distilling Gillyweed, or you practicing that broom curse? What are you doing?"

"I'm bringing the war to the enemy!" Neville hissed. "I would have left Goyle for later if the fool hadn't accosted me. He created the opportunity. I used it to my advantage."

Coedus gave a derisive snort, "And the Ravenclaw?"

"Brother of one of the Death Eaters who killed my family. He'd hazed Luna for years."

"So, what should I do with you Neville? I could turn you in. You'd be in the Ministry's hands by lunchtime."

He looked at his relative's momentarily horrified face, which turned cold. "But Uncle, what would happen when I told them who had taught me the broom curse?"

“Ah, you are learning, Neville, to use leverage. Perhaps, there is some hope for you yet. Still, you are sloppy. Already, there are whispers and suspicions amongst the students and staff and what have you achieved? Two meaningless targets eliminated. Should another die so soon, this place will be crawling with Aurors.”

“What do you propose, Uncle?”

“Since my rise into the afterlife, my specialty has been Potions. There are poisons that can kill slowly. They can take weeks or months to do the deed. Some are harmless, lying in wait until a second potion comes along to trigger the dormant poison. If you are going to weed this school of junior Death Eaters, you need to do it correctly, and do it smartly.”

“Teach me, then. I will do whatever you ask.”

Coedus set the boy down and dismissed him. He returned to his desk and withdrew the crisp sheets of parchment and returned to studying them. Only a few minutes elapsed before there was a knock at the door. Frustrated at the interruption, he pushed the documents into a folder in his desk. “Enter!”

The tiny young woman wearing the Head Girl badge entered. “Good morning Professor. I was asked by my father to come to you this morning for a reply to whatever offer has been extended to you.”

“What do you know of this?”

“I know that an obedient daughter does not question her duty to her father, nor does she seek answers to things that clearly do not concern her. I do know that he will be in the castle today concerning an inquiry into yesterday’s death and that he will find time to speak with me in private at some point.”

“You may tell him that I am intrigued by the possibilities, but I would need to see the actual documents and not incomplete copies.”

“Sir, I will relay the message exactly as you have said.”

“Very well, Miss Caruthers you are dismissed.”

He watched the young woman leave. The inspection of his lab and inquiry concerning his teaching at Hogwarts that occurred last week had apparently been a partial ruse to allow this mysterious envelope to be delivered to him with a most unconventional and tantalizing offer and a promise that someone would contact him for an answer soon.

Apparently, his adopted clan of Vampires had been eager to avoid any hostilities with the Dark Lord's forces. They told them all they knew about his background and used this knowledge to craft an offer that was difficult to dismiss out of hand. After all, Voldemort did have a proven track record for returning the dead to life.

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*Lord Potter,*

*An inventory of the Black real estate holdings showed that there are no dwellings suitable for a Wizard of your stature. To that end, acting in the interests of your vaults, I have procured a suitable dwelling for yourself and your wife.*

*The property formerly held by Lucius Malfoy was purchased two days ago at a distressed rate further increasing the value of your holdings. The delay was waiting for the final bids to be unsealed. You will be pleased to know that several parties withdrew from the proceedings, when I expressed the active interest of the Potter-Black estate in acquiring this particular property. It can be assumed that other humans are not interested in crossing your path. This fact can be utilized to further increase your financial prosperity.*

*I have contracted a team of our finest Curse Breakers to protect the property.*

*Of course, I am aware of the animosity existing between yourself and the Malfoy family. Revenge is an art among my people and you are worthy of our respect. It is this level of excellence that I wish to deliver as your personal account manager.*

*Respectfully,*

*Scarmaker*

*Guardian of the Potter-Black Vaults*

Harry reread the message before wordlessly handing it to Susan. He waited for her to read it.

She bit back a laugh. "Well, this certainly is a surprise! I won't complain. I went with Auntie there once for a formal party when I was eight. The mansion is a veritable palace. As I recall, it had a regulation Quidditch Pitch, three greenhouses, and a massive swimming pool. Can I send Trixie over to start making the place ready?"

Harry mulled it over. "Why don't we wait until the Goblins tell us that the new wards are in place? It sounds like Scarmaker used my name to scare off some of the bidders."

Ron had been listening in and decided to comment, "Wait a sec! You now own Malfoy's house? Oh that's the best one ever! It's even better than the rumor he's supposed to be a girl. Just wait until I ...."

Harry stopped him. "Ron, don't. I don't want to gloat."

"Don't worry Harry, *I'll* gloat for you. Malfoy was nice enough to point out that my home was gone last week. I'll just be returning the favor. In fact, I'll even mention that if Charlie comes back with his Mum, that you'll let them share a room together there!" Ron chortled. Harry saw Hermione follow him from the table, shaking her head, no doubt trying to talk him out of it.

He wondered if and when Narcissa and Charlie would return to England. Her knowledge of the secrets of the estate could be invaluable. As he pondered this, an owl dropped a copy of the Daily Prophet in front of him. His eyes widened in surprise at the Headline.

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"Checking in?" The man asked in English with a very thick French accent.

Narcissa found it difficult to resist the urge to smack the man. Somehow she controlled herself. "Yes we are. The reservation is for Byron and Michelle Ashland."

She saw Charles arch an eyebrow and allowed herself a small smile. This was the first time the pair had checked in under the guise of being a married couple. She had even transfigured a simple wedding band and gave it a golden glamour to commemorate the occasion.

After an exchange of currency and more than a few not-so subtle leers from the man behind the counter, they headed for the honeymoon suite. The French Mediterranean coast was much like they left it three weeks ago, rather idyllic and quite pleasant. What had brought them back to Toulons was anything but pleasant.

"Are you sure about this?" her man asked her. He was so boyishly charming and such a complete buffoon about some things. She pulled him into an embrace, brushing her lips against the side of his neck, delighting in the goose flesh that formed there and relishing the low growl from him.

"Charles, these past few weeks have had a sense of exhilaration to them. The two of us, on the run, looking over our shoulders and the ever present danger drawing us closer in ways I hadn't considered. Even though Lucius is rumored to be dead, we are still hunted. I grow weary of being the prey. The information our little Goblin friend has provided says that the Dark Lord's man will be here in this city conducting a bit of recruiting. The death of Antonin Dolohov will send a clear message back to his Master that says, 'You have better things to do than annoy Narcissa Black.' It should also help Harry's cause back in England."

"He's a dangerous man and not to be taking lightly."

She smiled at his caution. It was rather ironic coming from a wizard who used to work on the Dragon Preserves. Reaching behind her and unzipping her dress, she allowed it to slip off her shoulders and fall to her feet. She enjoyed his reaction, trailing her hand down the length of his shoulder and continued, "That's why we'll take him together. Now enough of this! There is a rather large Jacuzzi in the

other room and I am rather sore from the ride in that uncomfortable contraption. Order some room service and then join me.”

Even in his days as a Seeker, Charlie had never moved as fast as he did right then, diving onto the bed and grabbing the phone.

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## ***Manifesto of a Dark Lord***

***By***

***Rita Skeeter***

*Yes, faithful readers, your eyes do not deceive you. I, your intrepid darling of danger, summoned my courage and sat down for an interview with the Wizard, whose name can make even a battle tested Auror tremble in fear.*

*There in a hovel, previously own by the notorious Severus Snape, (recently slain in a brutal battle with Harry Potter) I interviewed the Wizard who would rule us all. It required magically reinforced nerves to not fear for my own safety, but I persevered, because my readers deserve all the truth I can bring them.*

*Those that have been in his presence and lived to speak of it would readily agree that he exudes an air of confident power. He has a sharp mind and a disarming wit that can put even a skeptical Witch like yours truly at ease. Still, I was not so foolish to overlook his serpent-like, ritual enhanced features or as he described them, “The Telltale Signs of a Wizard’s Journey to the Precipice of Greatness.”*

*We exchanged simple pleasantries and he thanked me for being willing to be objective about his view of the world. I started with the simplest and most obvious question, “Why do you want to conquer the Magical World?”*

*His answer was thought provoking, “Rita, my dear, the Wizarding World has been in peril long before I was even born. Backward, ineffective, and inflexible leadership dating from the times when the Americas were under Colonial rule has created what could be the*

*greatest threat to our people that has ever existed. Yet, we do nothing. No, that is not correct, we do less than nothing! The Muggles are everywhere. They now fully infest six of the seven continents. Their technology grows ever more ominous, everyday. What protection do those who call themselves leaders offer? They offer nothing. They seek no answers, only better ways to conceal ourselves from the Muggle menace. For over fifty years, the Muggles have possessed a weapon that can level entire cities. Mark my words, the day will come when they turn on each other. What will those leaders do then, when confronted by fiery Armageddon? What clever little spells keeping our lands and homes hidden will protect us from their insipid technology?"*

*He paused for a moment to allow my furious quill strokes to catch up and continued. "I am not trying to conquer the Magical World. I am trying to save it from its own folly. Our population and culture is stagnant. We ignore the changing world. What horror will have to occur to make our society wake up to the very real threat out there? In the Dark Ages, we lost our way and cowed ourselves out of fear that the Wizards and Witches aligned with the Vatican would lead a vast army to wipe out our people. Much like that fossil Dumbledore, the Church is now a shade of its former self, as Muggle governments with secular ways have replaced it. That might sound like a good thing, but let me assure you it is not."*

*When asked to expand upon that, he gladly continued with fervor. "If the Statues of Secrecy were ever to fail and knowledge of our society can no longer be Obliviated from the Muggles at large, what will we do? A more pressing question is what would the Muggles do? How would they react to learning that they are not the pinnacle of evolution on this planet? There would be fear, mistrust and terror. They would seek to control us to their own ends. We would become a servant race ordered to solve every malady in their miserable lives. Our healers would toil away, fixing their infirm. Our protected magical species would become their sporting trophies. We would become the new House Elves! How much and what we would be allowed to learn would be controlled to a level well beyond anything the Ministry could ever envision."*

*I must say, he painted a chilling picture of a world I certainly wouldn't want to live in, but I soon realized there was more. "Sadly Rita that is the best scenario. If they can control us, they will. If not, they will study us and dissect us. They will seek to learn why we are special and they are not! They will try to duplicate our blessed gifts and if they cannot, they will strive to take our gifts away. Our wands will be confiscated. We will be persecuted and driven to extinction. Our families will be separated. Our history and heritage will be annihilated! We will be destroyed. Tell me Rita, when faced with all this, how can I not try to stop this? The only thing worse than being powerless to save us all, is having the power and doing nothing about it! Our inaction will be our downfall!"*

*He paused after his impassioned plea, seemingly spent. I had let my subject control the tone of the interview so far, but that was about to change. My long time readers know that I do not shy from the tough questions. "I understand your concerns for the future, but let us discuss the here and now. Tell me about the War that you are fighting now and not the one that looms in the future. The Minister is quick to point out your reliance on foreign fighters. Dumbledore speaks passionately about what he calls 'a Dark Lord's flawed ideology'. Finally, tell me about your relationship with Harry Potter. How has your life and his become so intertwined?"*

*After complimenting my choice of questions, he answered. "I'll start with the Minister. I suppose I should be careful in my answer. The Minister's detractors and opponents have been having a rough go of it as of late. The opposition from the Fudge regime has been eliminated with a vengeance that leaves me rather envious. I salute his creativity."*

*I had to interrupt, "Surely, you aren't implicating the Minister in the recent spate of murders?"*

*"Rita, you have to look at who benefits from these circumstances. With the loss of dissenting voices, the Scrimgeour Agenda moves forward without any opposition, save my followers. Not twenty-four hours after Madame Umbridge stymied his efforts to exile her, she was brutally murdered. On the subject of foreign fighters, Rita, the fact is that people are in fear from the very government that is*



*supposed to serve them. Look no further than the notices of seizure and auction in your own paper. The proceeds of the sales of Scrimgeour's ill-gotten booty fund his war machine. Did not the Magna Carta guarantee certain rights to us all?"*

*I reminded him that these new laws applied to persons convicted of crimes, "Ah but Rita, forgive me if I do not place that much faith in the justice provided by this Ministry. Their track record is slightly less than stellar. So, I must rely on brave and ambitious Wizards and Witches from outside the Isles, who have answered the call to action. Now, you asked me about that old relic, Dumbledore? 'The Only One I've Ever Feared.' I think our last encounter put that myth to rest. He's a meddling old fool, who got lucky a generation ago, facing an overconfident Dark Wizard. Perhaps he should concern himself with the safety of his charges. Already two students have died since the beginning of the term. Where is the outrage? Where is the accountability?"*

*His eyes flashed dangerously red and for a moment, I was reminded exactly how frightening the Wizard before me was, "As for the Potter boy, supposedly there is a Prophecy that links us. If you believe the public has a right to know, you should bother them."*

*I asked what I could tell me about this prophecy; "I know the first two lines for certain. Everything else is conjecture. It states that, 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...' Apparently, it could have applied to either Harry Potter or another boy named Neville Longbottom. Prophecies are magic's way of making certain we do not become complacent in our power. It could be that this was fulfilled during our first encounter. I can't be certain."*

*With that our interview drew to a close. I asked him for a parting statement, for his message to the population of England.*

*"I am a liberator. The failed policies of those who claim to lead, but never explain where they are leading us to, endanger us all. Those who oppose me will face my wrath before we deal with the threat posed by the Muggles. I shall quote Albus Dumbledore. For a change, I happen to agree with him. 'Dark and Difficult times lie ahead of us.*

*We must all choose between what is right and what is easy.' It would be easy to dismiss the Muggles. That's what your leadership has been doing for hundreds of years. Are we a great people, are we a civilization, or are we nothing?"*

Harry slapped the paper down onto the table; he was furious. He ran through his Occlumency drills to calm himself – he felt stifled in this castle full of people. Many watched him stare at the paper in disgust. He had to do something; the life of a bystander didn't suit him.

*'I need to do something about this!'*

In a fit of accidental magic, the paper burst into flames.

Susan's dry wit broke into his thoughts.

"Hmm, I never knew your eyes could actually burn a hole through something. Maybe I need to buy some fireproof knickers? Now Harry, be a dear and lower the table back to the ground; you're scaring some of the first-years."

The table dropped six inches to the ground with a loud clatter.

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## Chapter 32 – According to the Plan

September 10th, 1996

“So, I see I have five years of blatant favoritism and substandard teaching methods to contend with. It will not be easy for me, but I assure you it will be significantly harder for you.”

Harry focused on the Vampire’s voice, trying to ignore his earlier anger from breakfast. Hedwig was on her way to Rita, that self-serving bitch, with a rather quickly written and harsh message. *Get through the day without provoking anyone. It’s a good plan.* Potions was one of the combined classes and the only one, other than Transfiguration, where he would have to associate with any Slytherins. Most of the students in the room shifted uncomfortably under their new instructor’s gaze. Harry refused to acknowledge the attempted intimidation. After all, he had been close to killing Coedus earlier this summer. From the corner of his eye he caught faint smile on Susan’s face as she nudged her knee against his leg.

“As you are aware, I am Vampire. My heart ceased beating in 1884. This change left me without the majority of my magic, so I was forced to become a superior Potion Brewer. Ironically, your Ministry like the rest of Europe refuses to acknowledge beings such as myself as Masters of the Craft. From 1912 until 1960, I was under the tutelage of one of the oldest of my kind – Cecelia de Medici. She has forgotten more about the art in her six hundred years of existence than you will ever know! Today, we will start with the Blood Replenishing Potion. It is one of the most important elixirs to both your kind and mine as well. For the first two years of my apprenticeship, it was the only potion I was allowed to brew. It was a full year before I produced one of acceptable quality to the Mistress of Pain.”

Surprisingly, Neville raised his hand, while scanning a parchment.

“Yes nephew, what is your question?”

Harry heard the tap Hermione’s foot on the ground. *She usually does that when she is annoyed.* Harry pondered why she was annoyed, realizing that it was probably the seemingly hypocritical example of favoritism after he had just panned it moments before.

“Vampires cannot take the blood replenishing potion. It is not on the list of the eighty-six potions your species is able to ingest,” Neville said confidently.

Coedus looked thoughtful, “Mr. Longbottom is quite correct. As he is my only living relation, I have given him a list of compatible potions, should I ever require his assistance in these matters. Someone tell the class why the Blood Replenishing Potion is so important to my kind? Mr. Potter, what is your theory?”

Harry thought for a moment, “So your victims last longer.”

Allowing his fangs to be clearly seen Coedus nodded, “Indeed. An average human male will last only one feeding for three or more Vampires. With a proper regimen of Blood Replenishing Potions, that same human will feed a group of five for a week before expiring.”

The class seemed to collectively recoil from the implications of the statement. Harry suspected Coedus sensed their discomfort and perhaps was even relishing it “What? Do I offend you? You’ll find there are many things in this world that would qualify as unsavory.”

Parvati looked horrified, “But can’t you can live off livestock?”

“You *can* live off a completely vegetarian diet, but you choose not to. Ten of your ridiculous house points for asking a question before you think about it. Fortunately, you have steered me back to my lesson or you would find yourself scrubbing your delicate fingers raw in detention this evening. Miss Patil has aptly demonstrated the most dangerous problem in a Potions Lab – acting before thinking. Accidents happen when you allow your thoughts to stray from the cauldron in front of you. From the shine on the cauldrons in front of me, I see the seventh-years warned you of the dangers of dirty cauldrons. The most insignificant impurity in an elixir will rob it of a portion of its potency.”

The Vampire paced through the lab stopping in disgust at Dean’s, Pansy’s, Terry’s and Megan’s tables. “In life, you may very well have to make a potion in a hurry, but in here you have all the time I allow you. Therefore, you have no excuse for not working with clean equipment!” Harry was glad that his cauldron was brand new

replacing the one that had been destroyed in the fight with his previous Potions Instructor.

Coedus looked down at him. "I see some of you have purchased new cauldrons. Tell me Mr. and Mrs. Potter, did you precondition them prior to class?"

"No sir. They're preconditioned by the manufacturer," Susan answered.

Harry was slightly confused.

"And you believed them? Quit wasting my time, you ignorant girl. Brand new cauldrons should be broken in by the brewer before proper use; they contain the highest levels of impurities from the manufacturing process. You may spend today and this evening's detention conditioning your cauldrons. At tomorrow night's detention you will brew this lesson's potion."

He looked at Susan's flustered face ignoring Harry's. "Unless of course, your faith is so unwavering in the person that sold you these, that you believed them. We can test it for impurities. If I am wrong and the cauldrons are indeed ready for use, then there will be no detentions. If I am right, we shall see each other for a week. You look like the trusting sort, so I'll give you a choice. Do we test, or not?"

Harry looked at Susan and squeezed her hand under the table.

"We'll take the two detentions," he murmured.

He heard a few snickers coming from the Slytherins that immediately stopped when the Vampire whipped his head in their direction.

After ten seconds of staring directly at Malfoy and Crabbe, Coedus continued slowly, "A wise answer, Mr. Potter, I doubt these cauldrons would pass. Most cauldron makers condition their products a dozen at a time with some peon tending a dozen fires making a pittance for wages. Ever tended twelve fires at one time and kept them all at a proper temperature? I earned thirty-seven sickles a week doing that very job. Yes Miss Granger?"

“What about the ingredients? We didn't harvest them ourselves, so if you apply the same logic to the ingredients that you do to the cauldrons aren't they impure as well?”

“A second worthy question, perhaps there is some hope for this group. You will clean your ingredients to the best of your abilities prior to use. Dirt, mold and animal droppings on herbs affect the purity. Who among you likes the taste of dirt, mold and animal droppings? Because if you don't care about your ingredients, then you obviously must like the taste. I'll speak to the house elves about your menu selections if you like. If you did not personally grow and harvest the plants, quarry the minerals, or gather the animal parts yourself – then you assume a certain level of risk that the components of your potion are not the best they can be. You can only control your technique, the cleanliness of your components, and the quality of your equipment. I believe I have made my point. While the Potters prepare their equipment for use, the rest of you will make your first attempt at a Blood Replenishing potion. I shall have to lower my standards; or else we won't be able to move on to another potion for several years.”

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Were he to be approached in the future by a budding Dark Lord or Lady, Lord Voldemort would impart the following advice before killing them, ‘Never expect it to be easy. Things go wrong all the time. The best laid plans and all that rubbish.’

This graveyard was one giant deathtrap. Wary of Necromancy, most magical families were rather protective of their dead, but this is borders on the ludicrous! All had been quiet until he opened the gate of the small mausoleum. Suddenly, all the statues had come to life, reminding him of McGonagall's chess pieces.

He considered this as he stepped over the battered corpse of either Yaxley or Jugson. The man's head had been crushed by a statue of the Christian savior brandishing his cross. The two families intermarry so often that it's hard to tell which was which. A blasting curse reduced the animated savior to rubble, as a pair of Angels brandishing stone swords stepped forward to take its place as bolts of energy smashed slammed harmlessly into their alabaster wings.

Around him, the eight remaining Death Eaters struggled against a graveyard come to life, as tombstones flew through the air hurled by the dozen animated statues in the rear. It was a cleverly designed trap. Spinning deftly, he banished both Angels into the next rank of statues and deflected the next volley of tombstones from crashing into his fighters. He would have to revisit this combat in his memories to evaluate the performances of the survivors. Some combined their spellcasting to concentrate their firepower. At least no one had been foolish enough to break and run, yet. The wrought iron fence pieces became javelins. Cold iron was far more resistant to magic than stone.

Using the same expanding wave of power that had tossed Dumbledore into the air, he cleared the immediate area of enemies, to give his troops time to regroup. "I will shield against their missiles. Concentrate your power and destroy them!"

Turning, he wandlessly summoned one of his followers out of the way impending doom as two battered gargoyles converged on her position. She tumbled to her feet and began firing a near continuous stream of Reductor curses. Helen Edgecombe nodded her thanks before returning to the fight. Her loss would have been unfortunate to his future plans.

He cleared several more before he was forced to block the next volley of iron death. In a sense it was flattering that few wizards, and certainly none here, other than he, would have sufficient power to block a dozen iron javelins at once.

He bellowed encouraging his followers, "Fight onward! Use the debris as battering rams." It was a far more effective tactic as the Death Eaters began using the granite slabs as giant bludgers.

Five minutes and another casualty later the battle was over. Only one of the two fallen would be salvageable.

"Fan out. Look for cadavers less than five years old. Muggle bodies are not usable after that."

He returned his attention to the small mausoleum in front of him. If there was one defense, there should be more. He began moving his wand up and down testing for additional wards. He found two more

traps and a ward tied to the coffins that would vanish the cadavers if he opened them before dispelling it. He cursed himself for not knowing better. He should have anticipated the trap. This was all so out of the way.

What troubled him the most was the empty portrait frame on the far wall; he had no doubt who had warded this graveyard. It could be no less obvious if Albus had left his autograph on the wall.

Helen Edgecombe called out from the entrance. "Milord, there are no other bodies in this graveyard. It was a ruse."

"Yes, I suspected as much. These are the only two that count." A flick of his wand removed the lids of the coffin. The preservation charms had kept the bodies in excellent condition. His blazing red eyes studied the lifeless bodies of James and Lily Potter. He turned to Edgecombe, "Transport these two with care. Have them placed in my private sanctuary. I have special plans for them..."

He watched the frame as the portraits were removed. A middle aged witch reappeared in the frame. Lord Voldemort immediately recognized her. "Hello Dorea; did you give my regards to Albus? If I had known it was you, I would have allowed you a chance to get a look at your son and daughter-in-law before I stole their bodies."

"Eventually all your deeds will catch up with you", the woman answered slowly.

Voldemort allowed a wide smile to cross his face, "How appropriate! Those were the very same words you said to me before I killed you. Tell your grandson that I made a promise to him in his first year at school. I intend to fulfill that promise." He bowed to the painting before freezing the echo inside of it.

*It is true that things don't always go as planned, but even a victory with cost is still a victory. I do hope Peter is having a better day than this.*

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“Well that’s a day I’d like to forget and do over,” Harry listened to his wife muttering as she skipped a stone along the lake. “I hope Skeeter hurries up and arrives; I’d hate to arrive late for our detention.”

Harry looked up at her from the rock he was sitting on and then to Hermione, who arched an eyebrow. Tonks stood nearby, close but far enough away to not be part of the conversation. He chuckled and asked, “Bitter much?”

“Sorry. I *don’t* get detentions. I’ve only had three, make that five now, since I’ve been here.”

Hermione laughed. Harry couldn’t help himself either having five in a single week. He smiled as his friend commented, “I think Susan Bones was a low profile target – a hard worker and well liked by everyone. Susan Potter, on the other hand, is a high profile target for anyone with an axe to grind with the man in her life. Welcome to the Close Associates of Harry club! Girls who used to be friendly will be jealous. Boys will be a bit uncomfortable around you, not wanting to seem like their flirting with Harry’s wife. The teachers will probably be the worst. Most of them dislike seeing students given special status or attention. You have your own suite, your own house elf and your own set of rules.” Turning to Harry she continued, “The only question is what exactly you did to anger our new Potions professor?”

Harry shrugged dismissively, “I figured I was going to get detention sooner or later from him. I hit him with a few curses the night we first met; he was trying to kill me at the time. I’m guessing he hasn’t really forgotten that. Sorry Susan, I guess this is the ‘worse’ part of ‘for better or for worse’, but I’ll be glad if this is the worst we see.”

Hermione’s eyes lit up, “Really, which ones did you use?”

Susan interrupted; Harry knew she was purposefully changing the subject. She had witnessed the curses used by Harry that night and knew the reasons why he wouldn’t want to answer. “What I really want to know is what Neville is doing in Potions this year? I saw his OWL results; he got an A on the written and a P on the practical. Overall, he managed an A.”

That sidetracked the Gryffindor Prefect, “Ron and I asked him about it after class, before Captain Ron ran off to book the field for Quidditch tryouts. Apparently, Professor Longbottom convinced the Headmaster to allow Neville to take the class for no grade. He still has to do all the homework and the practicals, but he’s not going to get graded for it. It won’t stop him from taking the NEWT, but there won’t be any entry in his academic record. Neville said the Professor has made it clear that he will be proficient in brewing every one of those eighty-six potions on that list. I offered to help him with some coaching if he needs it, but I’m still a bit behind on all the spells I want to cover for the DA. You’re still showing up for the meetings, right Harry?”

“Sure, if we didn’t have detention, we’d be there for the first one tonight. I’ll help, but you’re running things. I’ll be the figurehead.” Harry looked across the field at the Quidditch pitch and the figures darting in the distant sky. He wished that he could be among them.

*Ginny will be a good seeker. It’ll give her a chance to move on.*

She asked hopefully, “Do you think that you and Professor Flitwick could put on a demonstration for us? I just know everyone wants to see one.”

“Hermione, it’s more up to the Professor and the Headmaster. They control when and where I practice. I understand that people want to see that I am ready to fight him, but they have to know that I don’t want to advertise my progress.”

“I think it would be a good morale booster. Harry, people want ...”

Hermione’s sentence was interrupted by Tonks whistling and pointing at the Marauder’s Map in her hands.

“She’s here. Come on show yourself Rita! We haven’t got all day.”

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Rita appeared suddenly changing out of her bug form with a smile on her face. “Goodness Harry, give a girl a minute to catch her breath. The Castle Wards have been extended and Hogsemeade is crawling

with Scrimgeour's Auxiliaries. I had to fly halfway from there just to get here."

She paused dramatically straightening her clothing. Plastering the most innocent look on her face, "Now you asked for this little *tete a tete*? I'm a busy girl these days. Lovely little owl you have by the way, very insistent."

Her smarmy attitude was too much for the boy-who-lived; she lived to press people's buttons. "What the fuck were you thinking?" Harry roared.

Rita leaned forward, placing her hands on her knees and put herself on Harry's eye level, "Oh joy, no beating around the bush today. I'll skip the answer I gave the Minister this morning, which was 'That this blouse goes well with this skirt, why don't you like it?' I doubt you'd enjoy the joke either. So, let's cut to the chase then, shall we? First off, I did it to save my taut little bum. That interview wasn't exactly on my schedule for this week. Second, I did it because we, and we means the editors and writers of the Daily Prophet are tired of being everyone's bitch! We're not the Ministry's PR machine, we're not your's and we're not his either! Third, it's like I told you that night, someone's going to win and someone's going to lose. The rest of us that survive this are going to live in the world of the victors. They deserve as much truth outside the blatant propaganda as I can give them. Scrimgeour tries to muzzle me now and the public will see right through it. You're a big boy now, Harry. You don't want to be Dumbledore's lapdog anymore than I want to be Scrimgeour's."

"He could just take control of the presses?" Rita smiled at his question. Harry was so delightfully blunt.

"That's where Fudge really kicked him in the bits. Oh he'll claim that we're not being patriotic enough and he's already made those threats, but right now he doesn't have the clout to follow through. His side controls roughly thirty percent of the Wizengamot. The opposition controls thirty-five. The rest and I include you, Harry, in this make up the other thirty-five. Scrimgeour has to walk a tightrope until he has the votes. The owner of the Daily Prophet is mostly an absentee owner, but do you seriously believe Rupert Murdoch would let the

seizure of one of his papers go unchecked. He owns virtually all of Magical Australia. He might as well sign the Australian Minister's paycheck."

Hermione interrupted her coldly, "Okay, he can't go after the paper itself. What about you? He could still arrest you for your unregistered abilities?"

"He *could* arrest me, but thanks to the whole Sirius Black affair there'd have to be a trial. I'd insist on truth serum and trust me when I say no one would like to hear what I have to say under the influence. Everyone's dirty secrets would come out. All the skeletons in every closet could come tumbling out. The same thing will happen if I suddenly end up dead. Every little confidential conversation would be fair game – even your feeble attempt at blackmailing me."

Rita paused momentarily allowing her words to sink in, before continuing like she was explaining how to tie shoelaces to a five year old, "Speaking of that, where do you think I was this morning, deary? I discovered the most wonderful thing yesterday, I'm an Animagus! So, like a good little magical citizen I ran down and registered, bright and early. I even made sure that my two outstanding fines were paid. Did you ever stop and think for a minute? All your little Slytherin classmates *knew* I was an Animagus, don't you think some of them might have tried the same trick you did, little girl? I always hoped for the day when I could tell you how easily I played you. You thought I was destitute and unable to work, didn't you? I was on a beach in Aruba for three months, writing under an assumed name, just waiting for you to come to me with a juicy offer. It didn't take nearly as long as I thought. Access, honey! You wouldn't have put a time limit on that oath if you weren't going to come back to me at some point."

"But you swore an oath and signed a parchment!" Hermione exclaimed.

Rita openly mocked her by mimicking Hermione's voice, "Amorita Elaine Skeeter signed your paper and swore your little oath. Harry dear, what's my name?"

"Francine Amorita Skeeter."

Rita knew she was being petty, but it didn't stop her – it rarely did, “Points for a good memory to the young hero! Rita Elaine was my Grandmother. Do you have any idea how many contracts and oaths I've had to swear? Let this be a lesson to you – you little sanctimonious bint! When you make a person swear and oath, you better make sure they use their own name, sign in a blood quill and not do a little wordless flash from their wand to emulate an actual oath! Keep that look on your face for a moment – I want to savor it.”

“That's enough!” Potter bellowed.

Rita noticed that all three witches had their hands near their wands, but Harry's voice, and the magic behind it, seemed to freeze everyone in their place, Rita was suitably impressed. “I think you've made your point, Francine. Let it go.”

Allowing the use of her first name to slide, she let her angry visage melted away instantly and was replaced it with her normal cheerful expression. “Certainly Harry, I didn't come here to relive old history. I'd like to see you come out on top of all this. You're a breath of fresh air, the real thing – if you will. I'd also like seven handsome men to cater to my every whim, but I don't always get what I'd like, now do I? Let's make everything crystal clear, despite our recent happy times together, you're trying to use me. Don't bother denying it. Scrimgeour's trying to use me. The Dark Lord is trying to use me. Guess what? I'm going to use all three of you. All of you want to bring your fight onto my battleground, well that's one fight that you'll have to play by my rules! You'll have your press releases. They'll have theirs. I'll put them in print and give the public a chance to see it. I assume Miss Granger already has your response prepared?”

“Not yet, it'll be done in the morning.” The bushy haired buffoon answered her face still red with anger. Rita just couldn't bring herself to like the girl. *If you're going to act superior to everyone, then you'd damn well better be able to back it up.*

“Owl it to me, make sure you calm yourself down before you write it. Your opponent is a powerful smooth talking charmer, who is trying to use fear of the unknown to justify his actions. Better let Dumbledore

edit it for you. If you're going to fight, Miss Granger, fight to win. Harry, any quotes for tomorrow's edition?"

Harry pulled out a piece of parchment. She read it aloud, "Muggles didn't walk into Fred and George Weasley's shop and kill three people looking for a hostage. Tom Riddle did. People working for the Muggles didn't kidnap Blaise Zabini, Marcia Compton and Viktor Krum. Muggles didn't rape and torture a fourteen year old witch. People working for Tom Riddle did these things. He can talk about the looming threat on the horizon all he wants, but he's the one willing to walk into a house he set on fire to kill a one year old baby. He dares to label his followers as revolutionaries, when he really calls them Death Eaters. What's so noble about Bellatrix Lestrange, Severus Snape, and the rest of that lot? If you want to listen to his lies and believe in the half-truths he represents, then look at the people he surrounds himself with, because if he wins, those are the types of people that will be your new masters."

"Nicely said, Harry, I'll make sure it gets in tomorrow's edition. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go check on my editor and make certain that he hasn't had a nervous breakdown yet. *Viva Le Revolution!* Miss Granger, send your response with Mr. Potter's owl."

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*He liked all his pretty pictures. They always seemed to catch his good side. Well it helps that he didn't really have a bad side! He wouldn't be the Fabulous Gilderoy Lockhart, if he did.*

*He would have to speak with the people at his publishing firm. The new intern they have assigned to him simply will not do. She either sits on the bed mumbling and crying or stares out the window on sunny days. At least his bodyguard, Franklin and his press secretary, Alice are quiet and efficient at their jobs. You don't hear them complaining. So far young Luna hadn't even been able to arrange his crayons in the proper order. She should know by now that he likes to do each letter of his name in a different color!*

*The door to his luxury suite opened and the catering staff entered. He admired their punctuality.*

“Ah my compliments to the chef, did he enjoy the autographed picture I sent back with you?” Gilderoy Lockhart asked

The caterer in her crisp white uniform nodded. “Of course sir, it made his day.”

“I knew it would. Ah fair Jocelyn, what succulent surprise has that culinary master provided for our dining this evening? Ah yes dragon liver filets wrapped in bacon and covered in a light hollandaise sauce. And what of my staff, what are they dining on this wonderful day?”

The witch smiled at him twirling her wand in her hand, while answering “meatloaf and gravy.”

*Gilderoy knew that the woman wanted him. They all did. He would have to rebuff her advances again. If she weren't pretty, he'd have already had her fired. The ring on her finger was just a feeble attempt to make him jealous. It was his burden in life. That could be the title of his new autobiography – The Burdens of Being Me by Gilderoy Lockhart. He grabbed a crayon and scribbled the title on his notepad. After they send young Miss Lovegood packing, he will insist that the next intern also take dictation. Honestly, how do his publishers expect him to work under these conditions?*

*He watched Jocelyn serve Franklin and Alice. He'd need to talk to them about their incessant fraternization and Alice's gum chewing. Gilderoy knew that he enjoyed a bit of Drooble's now and then, but as his press secretary it was rather unprofessional. He was enjoying the view of the caterer's delectable derriere when he heard a loud boom.*

*Looking at the wide hole where the wall used to be, he figured he should say something.*

“Well that's new. Renovating are we? Alice did you receive a memo on this?”

*He wished Jocelyn would stop screaming. You'd almost think she was being tortured or something.*

Some several men entered through the hole in the wall.

“Ah, the construction workers are here, everyone! Just give me a moment to gather my things and I’ll be out of your way. Would any of you care for an autographed picture?”

One pointed their wand directly at him. “Idiot! *Crucio!*”

Gilderoy thrashed in pain as the curse tore at him. It was pain as he had never felt it before! His entire body was on fire!

“Quit wasting your time! Let’s get what we came for and get out of here,” a Death Eater barked. “Klaus cover the hallway. Is anyone coming yet?”

“Nein, Herr Pettigrew.”

Gilderoy rolled on the ground, coming out of the spasms, listening to the voices around him.

*He felt different. Things were different. He was... He was... Bloody hell! He was lying in a mental ward at St. Mungo’s. That backfired curse from that wretched boy’s wand! The world knew that he was a fraud. No! This was not possible! This was a nightmare. The nurse’s wand was on the ground right next to him. Of course! If he subdued these three, he could turn it all around. He could see the headlines now – Lockhart’s Triumphant Return!*

Grabbing the wand, he shouted, “*Obliviate!*”

He felt the shiver of satisfaction as the man’s expression blanked and he stood there confused. Flipping his cot on its side to protect him from the one in the hall, he sent ropes to tie the dazed man in front of him. Memory charms weren’t the only thing he was good at. Some of his conquests liked to be bound! It was a surreal moment, almost like out of one of his books and he was actually living it!

Spotting the short man, whose arm was made of silver, he fired off another memory charm and another set of ropes. The one they called Mr. Pettigrew, why did that name sound familiar, dodged the Obliviator and pushed the brain damaged woman into the path of the ropes.



Like the swift and crafty fox he was, Gilderoy rolled behind the privacy curtains as his cot erupted in flames.

*When he wrote this chapter, it would be called Too Swift for you Pettigrew! He was back and nothing would stop him now! The one in the hallway was yelling that security was coming and defending himself. Good! It was just one on one now – **Mano a Mano**. The security guards would be the first witnesses to his glorious return!*

“Prepare to be vanquished! You won’t know what hit you! *Obliviate!*”

Gilderoy rolled into the aisle and felt alive as the rush of magic left his borrowed wand; his flawless plan was perfect!

He barely had time to process the dazzling green wave of energy before it struck him directly into his face.

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Peter sidestepped the memory charm and watched his opponent fall. Things were going wrong quickly. He had to hurry. “Klaus get inside and seal the door!”

He turned back to the bound Alice Longbottom and stared at the nurse cowering in the corner. “If you want to live, stay exactly where you are and do not move!” He finished transfiguring the addled witch into a guinea pig and dropped her into the pouch with her husband. Lacking any other plan he transfigured the confused Franz as well. If he didn’t recover it would reflect poorly on Peter’s performance. “Klaus, we’ve got what we came for. Carry the spare broom. Let’s move!”

Peter mounted his broom and sped towards the opening and the open air beyond. For a second his eyes locked with those of the young bug-eyed girl he knew all too well. Her face was a mask of rage as she leapt on to him as he sped by. He barely managed to steer the broom through the opening as the girl clawed at him scratching his face with her long, unkempt nails. Peter cursed as he dropped his wand. The wand fell to the street below, but its loss gave him full use of his metallic limb

With precious little thought, he swatted the thrashing girl away, not caring that they were twenty meters off the ground and sped away into the late evening. He swerved out over the London skyline knowing that the Aurors and their precious rules of secrecy would prevent them following. They would fly only for a minute and land before Apparating away. Things hadn't gone as planned, but he was still successful – and that's all that mattered.

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Harry and Susan entered the Potion's Lab, leaving Tonks outside and watched as the Vampire was critiquing the performance of three house elves who were busily scrubbing the various tables. Coedus simply gestured towards their table where their cauldrons were still simmering and resumed the close inspection of the cleaning crew's work.

Five minutes passed before he dismissed the crew, "Fascinating creatures. I've heard their blood has a most unusual flavor to it. From what they told me, your former instructor always had students cleaning the Lab as a punishment. It further diminishes my opinion of the man. Punish the student, not the quality of your work area."

"Why exactly are we here this evening?" Harry asked. "Since you failed just about everyone's potions today, we couldn't we have just as easily conditioned our cauldrons creating a failing potion along with everyone else?" Harry recalled Codeus' comments that 'Hermione's potion was closest to being acceptable, but that wasn't saying much.'

"I admire your directness, Mr. Potter. You understand subtlety, but have no use for it. On one hand, I needed to establish that it is I and not you in charge of the Potion's Lab. Your rivalry with the creature that laughingly called himself a Potions Master created expectations amongst your peers. I will not allow such pettiness in my Lab. It is a distraction and distractions are not tolerated."

He ran his hand along the surface of the table as he continued, "On the other hand, I remain every bit as curious about you as I was after our first encounter. We've traveled in different circles since that time and I have not gotten a chance to interact with you. The two of you

are at the heart of a war to which I am a less than willing participant. Long life has a way of sapping one's curiosity, but you have restored some of that."

Susan barely controlled a derisive snort; Harry didn't need an empathic link to tell that she was perturbed. He recalled telling Ginny that one of the reasons Harry had chosen Susan was that she cared for games and innuendo about as much as he did. Susan proved herself to be just as blunt and direct. It actually gave him hope for a long and happy marriage. Their arguments would be likely be numerous, but also, quick, direct and to the point. Ill feelings would not be allowed to fester with both of them willing and able to speak their mind at a moment's notice.

"I'm used to being looked at," Harry said. "What do you want to see and why should I let you?"

"I wish to see how you measure against the memories of notable wizards and witches I have seen. I have been working with Neville and he is showing impressive dedication and modest progress. My nephew speaks admirably about your skills. He has gone into great detail about the incident at the Department of Mysteries. I would like to see that in your wife's pensieve. In return for satisfying my own curiosity, I would be willing to show you spells from when I was mortal – ones that I doubt you would ever find someone willing to teach you."

The offer sounded enticing, Harry decided to nibble rather than bite. "It sounds interesting. I'm more curious about the training you've been doing with Neville."

"Very well then, leave your cauldrons simmering and follow me."

Coedus led them back into the hallway and motioned for Tonks to follow. He led them to an empty storeroom roughly ten metres wide and thirty meters long. The wall was blackened from a large amount of spell residue. "I use this basic exercise with Neville. He stands at that line and I move into this area at the other end. I change into my wolf form and he tries to strike me with a stunner. It develops his speed, stamina, and accuracy. Would you care to try hand at it?"

With fifteen meters separating him, Harry was hard pressed to hit the wolf as it pranced back and forth. It took five full minutes before Harry managed to clip the side of the wolf with his stunner. Tonks revived him while muttering an offhand compliment that she would probably still be trying to hit him. Susan conjured a cup and filled it with water and handed it to Harry, who gratefully accepted it.

The Vampire returned to his form, "I commend your skill. If you find yourself in need of practice come find me. If we are able to use the Come and Go room, I will have it create a cushioned floor and see if you were capable of striking my bat form – some other time, perhaps?"

Harry replied, "Not a bad idea, speak to Professor Flitwick about it. He's handling my training."

"I will. Now, go and finish your cauldrons. If you agree to the exchange of memories, bring your pensieve to your detention tomorrow night. I will see you then." Coedus walked from the room and headed towards his quarters.

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Coedus smiled upon reaching his door. The boy was powerful and talented. He was still waiting and wondering what scheme the Dark Lord would present for his resurrection or even if it was possible, but in the meantime, he would learn as much as possible about the boy's skills. Things were going better than he had planned.

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Harry, Susan and Tonks walked back to the classroom. Tonks spoke first, "What do you think Harry?"

"Pretty difficult work out, I'm not sure about the sudden interest in me. In years before this, I'd have probably said, 'If Dumbledore trusts him, then I should as well'. Sadly, that just isn't the case anymore. After we get back to our quarters, would you go speak with the Headmaster about this?"

The Metamorph answered, "I was already planning to, Harry."

For the next thirty minutes they waited for their cauldrons to finish their twelve hour baking before dousing the flames and vanishing the remaining liquid and impurities inside. They remained quiet, wondering if the Vampire would suddenly burst in and discipline them for creating distractions in the Lab.

Closing the door back into the suite, Harry loosened his tie and pulled his robes off. "You know in the past, I'd never have done that?"

"What wouldn't you have done?" Susan asked with a hint of teasing in her voice while encouraging Harry to 'help' her out of her robes enjoying his arms around her. When the robes were pooled around the ground, his hands remained around her waist.

"Asked someone else to go speak with Dumbledore, what's the word? Delegate! I'd have never delegated before. I'd insist on going up there myself. I know we have Charms homework, but do you have anything else?"

"I've got two chapters to read for Ancient Runes that I've been putting off. Why do you ask?" Susan answered.

She had reduced her course load but refused to abandon Runes after dropping Care of Magical Creatures and Muggle Studies. It was an afternoon class and one of the few times she wasn't with Harry. He had still been concerned enough, but the only Slytherins in the class were Bulstrode, Davis and Zabini. Davis was one of the 'out for herself types', Zabini had been a hostage over the summer and Susan was actually friends with Millicent Bulstrode. The rest of the class resembled a DA meeting and Hermione had assured him that she, Padma, Hannah, Megan, Lisa, Mandy, Terry, Dean, Ernie, and Michael would keep a close eye on Susan in the class.

"Well Mrs. Potter, if we put a waterproofing charm on the book you need to read and take a bath? You keep telling me that hand-washing all that hair is so much better than using magic... I could assist."

She arched an eyebrow at him and asked in an innocent voice, "From a position inside the tub as well, Mr. Potter?"

"That would probably be the most efficient position, wouldn't it?"

"I do believe you are correct." Susan said before noticing that her robes were still at her feet. Trixie normally would have picked them up by now. She looked around the room and saw Trixie standing motionless before the Black Family Tapestry. She walked closer to see what had caught the elf's interest.

At the bottom of the elegant but damaged tapestry was the new entry for Susan Marie Black-Potter. A horizontal line connected her to her consort, Harry James Black-Potter. She enjoyed seeing the names connected like that. What shocked her, however, was the three, thin glowing lines directly below her name. *Baby girl #1 baby boy, and baby girl #2.* Seeing that tidbit of info made her swoon slightly. She sat down on their bed as Harry came over. She couldn't hide the stunned smile on her face as she pointed at the tapestry.

For a minute neither said anything. Harry had plopped down on the bed next to her and put his arms around her. Finally, Harry said, "Well, that's one way to take care of that three child requirement. Aren't you glad it wasn't a five child requirement?" She looked at him slightly shocked, but softened, seeing a smile on his face.

She settled for smacking him playfully, "Git!"

A gentle push on the shoulder was his reply, "Git's wife! Let's forget about reading in the tub and just go take a bath together and celebrate. Whoa ho ho! Seems we aren't the only ones who've been busy! Look!"

Susan followed his pointing finger up the tapestry. The name Narcissa Irene Black was there with the Malfoy part crossed off and the line connecting her to Lucius Malfoy severed. Their solid line down to Draco Abraxas Malfoy remained, but there were some new additions Too. A dashed line now connected her name to Charles Arthur Weasley and a thin, glowing line went down to *baby boy*.

"We should let the Weasleys know!" Susan exclaimed.

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment and then flicked his wand removing the tapestry from the wall and rolling it up neatly. Another wave and it went into the opening closet and settled on the shelf, "No,

it's their news to tell. We should probably take this down – for their safety and ours. Come on, I'll start the water."

Susan felt momentary panic overcome her. "Three at once! Circe save me, I don't know if I'm ready for this. I don't need to be reading Runes. I need to be reading on how to be a mother!"

"You'll be fine. We'll be fine. We've got Trixie and a lot of people who'll want to help us. You're not in this alone." Harry's voice soothed her. Still slightly in shock, Susan allowed herself to be led into the bathroom.

It took a moment and she knew that she was struggling against a dam of tears threatening to break free, "You're right, Harry. It's just so sudden."

"Tell me about it," Harry said, giving her a squeeze. "At the beginning of the summer, I barely knew you. Now, we're married; we take bathes together and apparently, we're both very fertile. Before this summer, I was pretty much alone, hurt and angry all the time. Now, I'm not. Things don't always go like planned, but I'm not going to complain about this."

She hugged him - tightly, she hated that he made it sound so simple. He was always doing that! "So you're not scared or nervous?"

"No more than I was a few minutes ago when I thought we were just having one. The way I see it, I just picked up two more reasons to work harder. Come on, if I don't get started on that hair soon, it'll take all night."

After they got into the large tub, there were thirty minutes of *other* activities, but she eventually got her hair hand-washed as promised. Afterwards she lay drowsing on in his chest, feeling the water start to cool around them.

"I'm going to be huge. You do know that?"

"You saw my cousin. That's huge. You'll just be beautiful."

"Flatterer," she mumbled

“And, I’m not even trying to get into your knickers! Let’s hope one day we’ll be sending the kids off to school with Narcissa and Charlie’s boy. I hope they are safe, wherever they are.”

“I’m sure they are Harry. Come on let’s get out of the tub before I end up looking like a wrinkled, pregnant prune.”

They walked in their bathrobes when Sirius shouted for their attention from his portrait.

“Harry, Susan, get dressed. Tonks is on her way back to get you and take you to Dumbledore’s office. The Death Eaters have been active this evening.”

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Narcissa’s carefully laid ambush was turning to shit. Dolohov was supposed to have been alone in the warehouse, not meeting with three recruits. The Apparition and Portkey wards had already activated as they burst into the building. They’d knocked off one of the surprised recruits, but now instead of two against one, it was three on two. Dolohov was reported to be a wizard who enjoyed using obscure spells that were difficult to recognize. He was not phenomenally powerful, merely highly skilled.

Charles was barely holding his own against the duo set against him, banishing crates into the path of curses and using his superior athletic abilities to stay ahead of the pair of Death Eater hopefuls. Narcissa found herself dueling against the Dark Lord’s right hand man.

While casting a near silent multihued spell that even Narcissa didn’t recognize the old man some twenty five years her senior mocked her. “I’ve dueled against your late sister, Narcissa. She told me how weak you were. This isn’t a black tie social affair. You’re out of your league!”

“Never!” she banished a crate into the path of the unknown spell only to have the crate transfigured into a pair of wolves.



“Ah thank you for providing the last component to my spell, so kind of you. Kill her!”

Angry, Narcissa toppled a pile of crates onto the faux wolves but this gave Dolohov a chance to disillusion himself and slip out of her view. She responded by sending a pair of blasting curses into the overhead Muggle lighting, significantly reducing his advantage. The light from his curses would stand out now. The other two had Charles on the defensive. She had to risk helping him.

“*Imperio!*” She didn’t have Dolohov’s range of spells. She did, however, have a willingness to use her spells to great effect. *Kill the spare!* The use of an Unforgivable might alert the French Aurors, but that wouldn’t exactly be such a bad think at the moment.

Her thrall immediately fired a cutting curse into the wizard next to him and her lover was able to capitalize on the shift and strike with a bonecrusher that dropped the man.

*Kill Dolohov!*

Narcissa transmitted her thoughts but was propelled through the air forwards by a banisher that struck her in the back. She landed right next to one of the pinned wolves who lashed out and painfully bit at her calf. She lost control of the remaining wizard, but that wasn’t her biggest problem. She had also lost her wand.

Screaming in agony, she pulled her spare wand and decapitated the wolf. She barely rolled out of the way as a geyser of flame erupted where she had been.

She hobbled to her feet finding that Charles had finished the other one and was now fighting Dolohov. He was buying her time, but hopelessly outclassed. She did a quick patch job on her injured right leg and her breathing was labored from either the banisher or impact at the end of her short flight. She was as healed as she was going to be. She only hoped it would be in time.

It wasn’t.

“*Mentis Incarcerus Torqueo!*”

Whatever spell Dolohov used penetrated Charles' shield and struck him directly in the face. He staggered for a moment before dropping to his knees, clutching his hands to his head. Seconds later he started screaming.

It evoked painful emotions and a rage she had never felt before. She knew then that she could never leave Charles.

"That will keep him busy while I handle you, little traitor. You, I will kill. He will make a good prisoner for the Great One, but you, no one will shed tears for a dead traitorous bitch."

She tried to ignore his taunts, but found herself unable. Who indeed would mourn her loss? Cursing, Narcissa knew that she could not afford these thoughts. She could see him moving in the dim light and the smoke from the fires. The power drain of his spells must have forced him to discard his concealment spell.

"I will kill you," she hissed.

"You will try, little witch. You will also fail."

*"Tonare!"*

Her blasting spell came out charged with rage. The power behind it was fueled by her lover's cries of pain. Dolohov clearly had not counted on Narcissa's deep feelings for the young man. Neither had she. For a change it was now Dolohov desperately trying to block a spell.

There is a saying that starts *Hell Hath No Fury*. She was about to show Antonin Dolohov its true meaning.

*"Abrasion, Impactus, Percutio!"*

Her wand work produced two wounding curses and a strong bludgeoner. The piecing curse made it through the transfigured barrier the Ukrainian was using to defend himself with. The barrier fell to the ground and she saw him clutching his side.

He staggered and returned fire. She dodged his killing curse as he moved towards a large opening in the walls created by someone's blasting curse. Narcissa knew that he was trying to flee. She had to stop him before he got beyond the wards!

Instead of following him out the hole she created her own. It was a wise decision, as some kind of detonation curse exploded violently. He must have cast it with a time delay, because his back was turned and he was partly running and partly staggering. She couldn't let him make it.

Even in the dim light she knew what he was going to do – Apparate the moment he crossed the ward line.

*"Crucio!"*

The Unforgivable torture curse caught him as he was releasing his energy to Apparate. The result was not pretty; he splinched violently. Where his legs and left arm ended up, Narcissa would never know – nor would she care.

Dolohov's screams mixed with those of her young lover. Sending a piercing curse through the butcher of the Urals' heart, she silenced him permanently. The screams from inside continued.

*"Dammit!"*

She had hoped the spell would fade with the caster dead. She scooped up Dolohov's wand. Whatever it was, it was in there. Pulling the note from her pocket, she crammed it in the dead man's mouth and ran back inside seeing the fire beginning to spread. She ran to the lover, who was paying the price for foolishly believing in her. Narcissa Black was much stronger than Narcissa Malfoy had ever been, but that strength brought with it a much greater vulnerability.

Cradling his head, she spoke to him as he convulsed, "I'm here Charles. We'll get you someplace safe. I know who can help us." She created a Portkey from a piece of broken wood lying nearby and floated him beyond the wards. She was forced to stun him to get him to lay still.

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The French Aurors arriving on the scene minutes later found a flaming warehouse with three dead bodies inside and half of Antonin Dolohov on the outside. One of them removed the unsigned note from his mouth and read it to his colleagues.

*Lord Voldemort,*

*I present the body of your servant, Antonin Dolohov, with my regards. In the future, I would recommend that you leave people that do not wish to be found, alone, or the cost will be even greater.*

*Toujours Pur*

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## Chapter 33 – The Things We Do For Love

September 11, 1996

Since the beginning of the summer, there had been many instances where Harry had been close to completely losing it; he had even crossed that line once and Snape had paid the price. Standing in the middle of the crowded Headmaster's office, he felt that same rage tug at him.

"So, let me summarize what you have just told me," he said coolly to Dumbledore. "The portrait of my grandmother, *which you've never bothered to tell me about*, has reported that Riddle just stole my parents' bodies. To make it even more interesting, their bodies had been magically preserved, because you needed my Mum's body for the blood wards *that don't exist anymore*. Are there any more 'oversights' you might have coming down the line? I'm beginning to wonder whose side you're really on."

Harry's scathing comments immediately stirred up a small storm of arguments. The old man in front of him looked tired and worn.

"I see my apologies for this oversight are insufficient. To maximize the effectiveness of the wards, it required that Lily's body be preserved. As it would look suspicious to preserve Lily and cremate James, I preserved them both. Their resting place was warded to the best of my abilities. Against a lesser foe, my precautions would have been more than adequate. Your anger is understandable, but at the moment it serves no practical purpose."

Harry sucked in his breath and ground his teeth together. "You're right. This isn't the time or place to discuss your many failures. He has my parents' dead bodies as well as Neville's still-living parents. The question is, 'what does he plan to do with them?' In my first year he promised to bring them back to life, if I joined him..."

Dumbledore shrugged off the insult and pressed on. "I believe we can rule that out. If Tom were capable of true resurrection, it is unlikely that he would start with your parents. I would think that he would instead start with Bellatrix or any number of his lost minions. Minister Scrimgeour has indicated that there have been an increasing number

of reports among the Muggles of grave robberies. It is more likely that he is crafting an army of Inferii. Using your parents as the centerpiece would only make sense if the target were Hogwarts.”

Harry thought about it for a second. For it to have any effect, Voldemort would have to maneuver Harry into a position where he would confront his dead parents in the midst of an Inferii horde. No it didn't fit. It was too much of a reach and it didn't fit Riddle's sense of grandeur. “Probably not, he might use them in some kind of ritual.” Harry searched the room with his eyes, seeing several nod, but no one offered suggestions. His eyes came to rest on the seething angry face of Neville Longbottom. Harry wasn't the only one who had a reason to be angry. Neville's parents had been kidnapped, with Luna as a casualty - not to mention the rankling fact that Pettigrew was still alive. Harry refused to think about that now. Next time, he'd make certain the rat dies.

Someone from the back offered, “Perhaps we could do some research in the Restricted Section.”

A witch cleared her throat. Harry was surprised to see Madam Pince standing next to Madam Hooch. He never knew either of them had joined the Order. “It is called the ‘Restricted Section’ not the ‘Forbidden Section’ for a reason. We would better off, contacting the Unspeakables.”

Harry could tell Dumbledore was trying to steer the conversation in a more productive direction, though he was tempted to continue lashing out at him. In the end, it wouldn't solve anything, so he dropped it

The rest of the meeting was of no real consequence. Harry came to realize that the Order was mostly talk, with precious little action. Not once in the meeting did anyone even suggest the possibility of striking back.

When the meeting ended, he practically dragged Susan and Tonks out of there.

If no one here was going to do anything about this, then Harry would get someone who could.

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Neville left the meeting with a cold expression on his face. Harry wasn't the only person who was fed up and angry.

"Do you require an escort back to Gryffindor tower?"

He looked up to see his Head of House looking at him with concern in her eyes.

"No, Professor," he said blandly.

Her expression softened. "I've told you before; I was quite fond of both your parents. If you desire, you are excused from classes until you feel up to rejoining them. If you find yourself in need of someone to talk to, you know where my office is."

Neville thanked her and started on the long trip back to his dorms. His Uncle had been informed and expressed his sympathy. He had left early to tend his potions in the labs.

Neville was fuming; Professor McGonagall had been the only one to offer a modicum of sympathy. Everything said at the meeting concerned Harry's parents and nothing about his! Maybe instead of worrying about rituals and the dead, they should be concerned with what they can do with the living.

He wandered down the passageway, not really bothering to hurry. Curfew had passed twenty minutes ago. Most of the paintings drowsed in their frames. The few that still looked around, he ignored.

He was able to make it halfway down a flight of steps, but was stuck at the landing waiting for the descending steps to make their way back around to him. In the hallway below, he saw a broom cupboard open and a wizard slip out. Neville recognized him as the seventh year Ravenclaw prefect. A minute later, as he was finally descending the steps, the door to the cupboard opened again and Pansy Parkinson stepped out. The Slytherin witch was still adjusting her robes, when she saw him.

“Five points and I’ll put you on report for being out after curfew,” she regarded him like a dead animal someone had placed in her path. He wouldn’t mind killing her right now, but he promised his Uncle that he would wait.

“Whatever, bitch. I was in the Headmaster’s office. Amazing you could catch anyone who wasn’t feeling you up in a broom closet!”

Pansy’s face momentarily flushed with anger, “One thing’s certain, Longbottom, I’d never let a squib; I’d have to be crazy, like that Lovegood girl, before that would happen. I’d let them lock me up instead!”

Neville froze. His hand already had his wand half-drawn, but he choked the urge back and slid it back into its holster.

“Luna died this evening, when your friends attacked the hospital. I’d be careful what you say.”

Surprised, by both the speed of his draw and the news he imparted, Pansy was stunned. Briefly, she considered just turning and leaving, but her anger got the best of her. “It’s a good thing you put that wand away, Longbottom. Like you could use it if you pulled it out; you’re a limp wand in more ways than one, and another thing, like I care about that stupid crazy girl – she’s dead - good riddance!”

That sealed it. He would *definitely* kill her – just not today. In his best sarcastic voice he said, “So tell me Parkinson, how’s the engagement to Malfoy? Oh wait, he called it off the second he could, didn’t he? Maybe he knew about that Pansy is a plucked flower. Did *he* do the plucking before he tossed you out with the rubbish?”

The sting of her hand slapping him amused him. He could have stopped it, but one of his Uncle’s lessons was that ‘a little pain is good to help you focus’. “You’re nothing, Longbottom! Nothing! Do you hear me?”

Neville smiled at her coldly, “I hear you, wilting flower. Plants are my specialty, but I only like *useful* plants. You’re little more than a weed. You should have seen how fast that Claw scurried down the hall! It’s like he couldn’t get away from you fast enough!”



Pansy was about to go for her wand when a voice interrupted them. "Mr. Longbottom, Miss Parkinson, what is going on here?" Professor Flitwick stepped out into the light from the shadows."

Pansy's entire demeanor changed with practiced ease. "I'm sorry Professor. Longbottom and I were having a disagreement regarding Prefects and non-Prefects."

"Where's your patrol partner?"

"Stebbins had to use the loo, Professor."

"Off to your dorm, Mr. Longbottom. You've had a difficult night. Miss Parkinson, Prefects are to patrol in pairs. This rule is in place for a reason. I will speak to Mr. Stebbins and remind him of this as well. Should you be unwilling to follow that simple instruction, I will speak to your Head of House and recommend that you be replaced."

Neville suppressed a smug grin as Pansy deflated and muttered an apologetic, "Yes, Professor." She quickly headed off in the direction Stebbins went stopping once to stare angrily back at him. He met her eyes with no expression on his face, already considering how he would kill her. She deserved something special. She deserved to suffer.

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Two days had passed and Harry was flying without a broom as the sun rose on another day in Scotland. Other than the creepy ability his Animagus form offered, the only real purpose for it was flight itself and he needed to master it. Avian flying was so vastly different than being on his Firebolt. Finding that he still tended to beat his wings too much and not glide on the air currents. It tired him quickly, but it also provided the excuse he needed to be out here of Friday the thirteenth. Arithmetically, it was a significant day – not that Harry could really care.

Cawing, he landed on the outstretched Dragon hide gauntlet of his wife. Tonks chuckled and said, "You seem to have him trained rather well." Susan stroked his feathers with her other hand and nodded at him solemnly. She didn't like what he was going to do and he knew it.

Harry took off and make straight for the Auror's face. "Damn, you Harry! Okay another twenty more minutes and we need to get to breakfast and don't you dare try to crap on me again!"

He rushed through the crisp cool air and dipped down behind the stands and resumed his human form. The crate was just where Susan's elf said it would be. Inside was a raven close enough to his markings. Using his wand, he placed a compulsion on the bird and instructed it to fly around for a time and go to Susan. She'd continue the deception by saying that he wanted to stay in his form for a time and head back to their suite.

Releasing the bird, he pulled his Firebolt out of the satchel next to the crate and enlarged it. He already had his Dragon hide on underneath. Seconds later, he was skimming the treetops of the forbidden forest and staying low to stay out of site.

The Shrieking Shack was as miserable and run down as ever. Dumbledore had collapsed the secret tunnel earlier this summer. If Peter knew about it, then the Death Eaters knew. The secret passage into Honeydukes remained, but there was a hidden portrait in the basement of the candy store watching and waiting for someone to use it. The Aurors would be waiting for whoever tried to come out from the tight space.

Harry had no need to go inside. The young wizard standing next to the structure was his destination. He landed and shrunk his broom. Hopefully, he wouldn't need it again until he headed back to the school.

"Morning Fred."

"Hey Harry. If it had been anyone but you, I'd have thought it was a joke. I was still pretty shocked to see a Goblin with an envelope at my warehouse yesterday. Here's everything you asked for. Ten weight reduction discs and one mid-sized single compartment magic trunk for moving large objects. Mind telling me what you're up to? I could help."

"Sorry. Not this time, but thanks for those weightless discs. They should be perfect for what I need."

“Well in that case, I’ll be off. Angelina will be waking up soon and I promised her breakfast. She’ll be worried if I’m not there.”

Harry smiled at him knowing that Angelina had been a bit overprotective of Fred since his kidnapping. Fred returned the grin and Apparated away. Pulling the envelope out of the sack Fred had left for him, he held the Owl Feather Portkey. He slung the sack over his shoulder and grabbed the end of the trunk with his free hand and whispered the activation phrase, “Goblin-friend” and hurtled to his destination – Greater Hangleton.

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Narcissa paced nervously in the lavishly decorated office. It had been three days since she rushed Charles into the ward in the predawn hours, demanding that the night staff contact her friend Annette, who happened to be the Hospital Administrator.

Narcissa had to admit that she could raise quite a ruckus when she wanted to, but that didn’t matter right now. What was happening to Charles did. She dreaded the answer from the older blonde woman in front of her, who politely offered her coffee. Narcissa declined noting that none of the echoes were in their frames. Her friend handed her a mug anyway with a dazzling, ‘Healer’s orders’ smile on her face. Cissy’s French was passable, but thankfully, Annette’s English was much better.

“I have taken measures to ensure our privacy. We can speak freely without fear of interruption or being overheard. Our head of diagnostics has examined both Mr. Weasley and the wand. The curse he was placed under appears to be a rather unique mental torture curse originating from South East Asia. There it is called ‘Shackles of the Mind’. Suffice to say, it is a very rare spell.”

Grateful for the privacy that she had been afforded, both this morning and for the past few days Narcissa nodded, “How serious is it?”

“Very, from what little we could learn it binds the person into their nightmares. They either wake or they do not. The one study we could locate recommends providing external stimuli may help, but only three of the ten confirmed cases managed to break the curse.”

It felt like someone had punched her. He was dying, imprisoned in his nightmares and she was responsible. She swallowed hard, "Annette, what do you recommend? What kind of stimuli would you try?"

"The study recommends positive stimuli, familiar people talking to them, warm sponge baths, music playing in the background, cheering charms, and the like."

Narcissa set her mug of coffee down and thought, "What about the Phoenix song? The Weasley family is currently under the protection of Albus Dumbledore. Dare I say it would be the most positive external stimulation available?"

"Perhaps we could arrange it, but our diagnostician is uncertain; she has a theory that if we intervene with *negative* stimuli, pain may break the chain."

"You want to torture him?"

The witch quickly replied, "To *heal* him. It's an option, but let's talk about you first. I have managed to deflect any mention of you or Mr. Weasley to our Aurors, but Claude told me that you caused quite a stir with that battle at the warehouse. From my understanding, you are a hunted woman and Mr. Weasley was your bodyguard?"

"Yes."

"I talked it over with Claude and we will shelter you in our mountain cottage near the Alps. It is unoccupied this time of year, except when my husband uses it for his hunting expeditions. The Veela community nearby can be counted on to assist you and we can spare a pair of our own security staff to replace your bodyguard. When the winter holidays approach, we can shift you to our chateau and put you up in the guest wing."

Breathing a sigh of relief, she looked at her socialite friend, "You're very gracious Annette. The generosity of the Delacour family will never be far from my mind. Will I be able to take Charles with me, or will do we need to arrange his transportation to England? At the very least we should inform his family. Can you get a message to them through your daughter?"

Annette Delacour's face darkened detracting from the ever present attractive façade she presented to the world and she looked to the side. Narcissa immediately knew something was wrong. She could see the half-Veela tremble ever so slightly. "No, my oldest became a casualty of the war you escaped. Against my advice, she chased after your bodyguard's brother for the mere reason that he could resist her allure and now she is gone."

There was a moment of silence. Narcissa felt awful. "I'm so sorry to hear that."

Annette looked like she wanted to say more. Her lips thinned and pursed in a pained expression, but instead, she chose to move on. "The hospital's chief of security and two of his best men are waiting outside the office. They'll get you to our estate. I'll make the necessary arrangements for *Weasley*..."

Narcissa caught the slight hint of anger in her voice and disdain at Charles' last name. Years of being a socialite had given her the ability to decipher the undertones and hidden meanings in people's speech. "You don't care what happens to Charles, do you?"

All traces of politeness vanished from the beautiful woman's face. "The English returned my child's body to me. I think it's only fair that I return the favor."

"Your oaths ..."

"Narcissa, you should know by now that there are oaths and there are ways around those oaths. You've actually helped in this matter, because of your unorthodox method of getting him here, ensuring secrecy around your presence: as far as our records are concerned, neither of you were ever admitted as patients to this facility. I can do whatever I want to him and not suffer the slightest discomfort. Oh Narcissa, surely you don't care about him? You do! I hadn't anticipated that!"

"Annette, don't do this..."

"Odds are he isn't going to survive anyway. This conversation is so pointless. He is of no consequence."

“You’re letting your desire for revenge consume you,” Narcissa hissed.

The half-Veela’s face twisted as her aura flared slightly. Annette was used to getting her way and not above using her natural talents to get it. Fortunately, Narcissa was not a man. “He is bourgeois and beneath us. It is you who are letting your foolish emotions cloud your judgment. You should be more concerned with your own safety than this *peasant* who’ll likely be dead in a week. I’m offering you safety and protection, out of respect for our past friendship. My more than generous offer does not include succor to the family of the man responsible for my daughter’s death! You need to set your priorities straight Narcissa Malfoy. I could just as easily summon my security and turn you over to the hunters looking for you...”

The threat hung in the air. Narcissa’s hand drifted to her wand. “In that case, I must refuse your offer Madame Delacour. I will be taking Charles with me and we will be leaving.”

The conversation took on a decidedly hostile tone. “I think not, my dear. This room is sealed. The Floo is keyed only to my magical signature. You’re only way out is through that door. I have three men out there. They are totally loyal to me. All I have to do is tap this touchstone and they will be in this room. I may have to rethink the terms of my offer, Narcissa. There is no guarantee your ministry or your little boy hero will defeat the ascending Dark Lord. If he prevails, it might be in my family’s best interest to have something ‘useful’ to offer him when turns his attention towards my land. You will still be my guest, but perhaps under a different arrangement. Oh, put that wand away. You’re a trophy wife, not a duelist! Even if you *could* match me, what do you intend to do about the men in the next room?”

Narcissa guarded her face – her mind raced through the options – which were dwindling and poor.

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The dark of night suited Lord Voldemort. He had long since realized that no one, not even he, could be called ‘all knowing.’ There are so many rituals that one could not possibly know how to perform them all.

The true secret is knowing that the ritual exists and who can possibly perform it.

It was this knowledge that found him walking the slums of some barely named Jamaican village outside of Montego Bay, enjoying the warm night air. The ramshackle hovel stood near the edge of the water with a small dock extending out into the water. To the untrained eye, it would appear to be fodder for the next tropical storm that wandered into the area. To the trained eye, it reeked of magic; the kind of magic that said, 'Come no closer, if you value your life.'

It also looked the same as when he had last visited some thirty years ago. He commanded the bewitched van driver to stay with the vehicle, resisting the temptation to see exactly what the wards would do to an uninvited guest. The man would live for now for the simple fact that Lord Voldemort hadn't driven a manual transmission in forty years and the bodies inside needed to be free of all external magic. Getting them here was enough of a pain!

Walking to the perimeter of the wards, he released a flare of magic to announce his presence and waited. It would be impolite to do any more.

He did not have to wait very long as a young woman appeared. The priestess moved with an unnatural grace as he watched her walk towards him, her robes flowing like something almost alive.

"Good evening." He greeted her; his red eyes staring into her cat-shaped eyes. She was too young to be a full priestess, of course. Most likely she was an acolyte – unless of course, Dahlia was now dabbling in possession.

"I am Monique. What bring you heah?" Her thick Caribbean accent had a rich melodic quality.

"I seek the assistance of the High Priestess. I need a ritual performed."

Monique laughed, "Of course you do. No one come by heah for de sociables. I be keyin you to de wards. Dey will ensure your conduct in *huh* presence. You not be attacked, lessin of course we command

dem or you foolishly attempt to draw your wand. You not like what would happen den...”

“Nor would you, little witch. If I draw this wand, I will give Dahlia more than a limp this time and she was at her peak the last time we met. The wards are substantial, but I have survived much worse. You mistress is indeed quite powerful and her will pervades this land. I choose to respect that, so long as she remembers my power.”

The young priestess was clearly not expecting that reply. Clinging to what little remained of her haughty arrogance, she passed her wand over him and he felt the tingle of magic dance like an electric shock on his skin. Moments later, he was following her into the hovel.

Voldemort laughed silently, his guide was used to people begging her favor and catering to her for access to the ‘Queen of the Islands.’ Everyone needs to be threatened now and then. Survival is a primal instinct.

The interior was not much different from his memories. The entryway was magically enlarged, but cluttered. The walls were not quite set at ninety degrees which enhanced the feelings of discomfort he was supposed to be experiencing. The eyes of three reanimated rooster heads followed him into the room. The smallish furniture was elegant, but fragile looking. Dahlia didn’t like going out, but she always did *love* to entertain.

He looked appreciatively at her eerie masterpiece. From the other side of the smoky room hung what appeared to be a beaded curtain made of beads the size of a closed fist. As he approached they gained more definition until he realized that they were not beads, but a collection of shrunken heads. From the looks of things, she had recently added several more strands to the curtain. The heads began to moan warnings and plead to him as he neared. Lord Voldemort had an eye for the macabre and this was truly a collector’s item.

“I will inform the Queen of your presence. Wait here until you are recognized.”

Voldemort ignored her as she pushed through the strands of shrunken heads. Instead he counted eight rows from the left and



seven heads down to stare at the three heads in succession. They were his last 'gift' to Dahlia. The rune work on the heads was intricate and magnificent. That's one of the things he felt was missing these days. The new generations had no sense of craftsmanship.

Deciding he had waited long enough, he pushed through the gruesome construct into the next room only to see his guide spin, startled, towards him. Again, he ignored her and stared at the ancient crone seated at the table. Only one eye had any color. The other eye was a pale, blank, white orb. Her face was shriveled, her once coffee colored skin had long started to pale.

"Dahlia, my dear it has been far too long. I warned you that if you didn't stop doing that, you'd start to go blind."

The Voodoo Queen looked at him and spit on the ground at his feet. "Snake Mon!" I see now why my granddaughter be so nervous. De Great Snake Mon be scaring de Girl!" She broke down into a course of harsh phlegm-filled laughter.

Voldemort had the good grace to wait while the hag recovered. Eventually, she continued. "What foul ting bring you to mi doorstep? What bring de Great Necromancer to seek de humble help of, what did you be calling me once - 'a tiny island bone picker'?"

He responded with a cruel smile and taunting words, "Everyone has their own greatness, Dahlia. It has taken me a long time to recognize yours."

"Ah, but you be quick in forgettin which of us be spending time as a disembodied spirit? What did old Dahlia tell you? Necromancy without de Blood Magic just be making de zombies. You be makin a great zombie, but in de end it just a zombie..." She finished by wagging a finger at him.

He smiled back, "Touché, oh Queen of the Islands, you always warned me to not overlook Blood Magic and it did indeed come back to haunt me. In dealing with this, oversight on my part, I have stumbled on to an opportunity, and that is where you come in."

"The Queen do not be doing charity work and do not need your shiny coins, but you be knowing dat alreddy. So what you bring me dat I be finding interesting enough to do what you ask?"

"This is the eye that once belonged to the British Auror, Alastor Moody." He removed the object from his pouch and set it on the table in front of her ashtray with a cigar burning in it. The eye whirled and looked around the room.

"A cute little toy, I be seein in front of my eyes, but I know you. You've got sumptin better dan dis bauble?"

He did. Reaching into a small bag he began pulling it out like a cheap stage magician performing his act. "Indeed I do. Allow me to present the arm of Albus Dumbledore."

Her remaining pupil widened in surprise and the other one seemed to glow slightly, making him wonder just exactly what *had* she done to that eye?

"Oh, now dat be a prize wort lookin at! Let me look ad it. Yey, de preservation charm be good. It be a mos excellent piece. Dat meas you must want sumptin bad. What do Great Snake Mon want from a simple Island witch?"

Voldemort wondered how often the 'simple Island witch' had heard this before. "I have two bodies with me outside and I need a ritual. Because I must participate in the ritual, I cannot be the master of the ceremony."

"And which ritual would you be needin?"

"Revenants for the blood betrayer."

Her eye narrowed, "I know you be only child -- dat ritual not be workin."

"By chance, the ritual that returned me to the living causes me to share the blood of my enemy. My research indicates the ritual *will* work, but that I cannot perform it."

She slapped her hands on the cluttered table triumphantly, “Ah, you finally look at de Blood! Monique, get my cane, girl! I want to see dese body wit boat my eyes. You know dat dey is always a price?”

“I have nine other fingers, and the temporary reduction in strength is acceptable.”

He endured another coughing fit from the crone, making him concerned that she might not live to complete the ritual before she rose and was assisted out the door by her granddaughter.

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“*Imperio!*” Narcissa’s spell stopped Annette before she could reach the touchstone. Her opponent stood motionless, but she could feel the witch struggling against her will. Narcissa cast her eyes around the room, looking for a solution to her dilemma.

She carefully evaluated her options. Her former friend had been quite correct; the room was completely sealed and the only exit was the door leading to her security personnel. Thus, simple flight was out of the question. She could use Annette as a hostage, but at best, that would only result in *her* safe escape. Charles would be left to the cruel fate the hospital administrator had in store for him. She’d be better off Obliviating her and trying to start the conversation over again.

The obvious solution presented itself to her as she stood in the center of the room staring hard at the attractive Veela and thinking about the three men on the other side of the silenced door. It *could* work, but her betrayer would have to be convincing. After all, the three men worked around her on a daily basis and they might have a resistance to her natural charm.

“Annette will have to be very excited to see them if this is to have any chance of working at all,” she muttered under her breath.

A mental command from her caused to her unwilling thrall to begin removing her elegant robe and undergarments. Narcissa doubted that she would ever be welcome at any high society function in

France ever again! *Oh well, fuck the French. I never cared for them much anyway.*

Narcissa urged the woman to begin pleasuring herself. Meanwhile, she closed the distance between the two of them and then kicked Annette Delacour's clothing and wand under the desk. Oddly, Narcissa felt a surge of resistance from the witch. *Who would've thought that she's a prude!*

Narcissa concentrated and focused her will and her magic against the witch. Contrary to popular belief, use of this curse was nowhere near as simple as just pronouncing the word. Against a strong-willed opponent, such as the woman in front of her, it was quite difficult to force her to do something that she clearly did not want to do.

The battle of magic and willpower continued. The woman's hands slowly moved across her body, but it clearly wasn't doing anything for her. Sighing loudly, Narcissa hoped, that wherever he was, Charles would appreciate what she was about to do. With a slightly trembling hand, she reached out and began to caress her captive.

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Five hundred meters above the quiet town of Greater Hangleton was a speck in the predawn sky. If a person could see through the aura cloaking the magic carpet and its rider, they would be quite surprised. Naturally, Harry was counting on that surprise.

The goblins had really come through in response to his letter. The carpet from his vaults moved slowly through the sky, weighed down with its considerable payload. Sadly, even with the objects that Fred had given him, the anvils were still ridiculously heavy. Forged iron was one of the most magically resistive substances on the planet and borrowing from the occasional cartoon he'd been allowed to watch in his childhood, Harry was about to give the wards surrounding the Death Eater headquarters a special delivery from the Acme Corporation.

With luck, the six anvils weighing the carpet down would drop the wards enough for his real surprise. Harry wasn't sure he wanted to know exactly where the goblins of Gringotts had gotten their hands

on World War II era bombs, but he wasn't about to question such good fortune. A half dozen of these relics currently resided in the trunk he'd gotten from Fred earlier. Like some RAF pilot on those military documentaries, Harry was going to open that trunk and dump a whole load of pain onto those below.

Harry got into position over where he recalled the quarters were. He wanted to avoid the areas near the prison cells, in the event that anyone was being held there – like Neville's parents! Quickly, he maneuvered the first heavy handle into position and said the words to nullify the enchanted discs that Fred had provided.

Free of the sorcery, the object began to plummet. Harry wasted no time watching it, pushing the next one in the position and sent it on its way too. Only when the last one was headed downwards did Harry look to see what he had wrought.

The first two must have already hit and disintegrated in a flare of magic. He watched the third vaporize, but this time the wards' flare was a mere flicker. The fifth and sixth passed through the wards, completely unharmed. Knowing he didn't have much time he upended the trunk and released his lethal payload. He then pushed the old carpet as fast as it could go. If push came to shove, Harry would abandon the carpet in favor of his Firebolt.

In the last few seconds before the massive detonation, Harry wondered what the Muggles would think of the deafening explosion, the effect of which they wouldn't be able to see.

The explosions and the shock wave were thunderous, as Harry dived on the magic carpet and sought cover in the trees below.

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Susan sat at the small table in their private quarters. She was trying to focus on finishing her Ancient Runes homework, but she was failing spectacularly. The frightening prospect that not one, but three children were alive inside of her at this very moment didn't help one bit! The late-night meeting where they learned that the bodies of Harry's parents had been stolen didn't help either. The two days of watching her husband obsess about and plan a way to get revenge,

combined with the fact that right now he was out there doing Merlin only knows what reduced Susan's efforts to a fine exercise in futility.

She wondered if all those jealous girls she passed in the hallways, the ones who would always stare at her and say that she was so lucky, really understood what life was all about! Hell, Susan was having a hard time wrapping *her* mind around it and everyone was always telling her what a levelheaded witch she was. Of course, when she pictured married life, it didn't involve sitting around the table waiting to hear whether or not her fairytale prince had survived *yet another* battle.

Muttering to herself and knowing that this assignment was destined for substandard marks, she absently shuffled the sheets with parchment into some semblance of order and rested her forehead against the palm of her hand.

"Is Mistress upset?" Susan heard Trixie's voice cautiously ask. The elf knew Susan's body language all too well. "Would she like some tea?"

"Thank you," she replied.

The tiny elf poured a fresh cup of tea for Susan and seemed to linger for a moment, as if waiting to say something. "Is there something you'd like to ask?"

"The other elves of the castle want to welcome Trixie by having a formal ritual, but Trixie needs Miss Susan's permission to participate."

"What exactly does this ritual involve?" Susan asked curiously. She doubted that there was much knowledge among humans when it came to house elf rituals.

Her servant regarded her with widening eyes, "The ritual is being a symbol that lets Trixie be a castle elf. Trixie will be able to move freely through the castle once other elves are welcoming her."

Susan allowed a faint smile to come to her face. It was refreshing to hear of a ritual that didn't involve some sinister purpose. Much to the delight of the house elf, Susan gladly granted her permission.

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“Did everything go according to plan?”

“Bessie did as best she was told. Other elf will be away.”

“Bessie is a good elf. Bessie did this act exactly as she was told. Will the others notice that you aren’t at the ritual?”

“No. Messes happen all the time and elves must go clean the messes, even during the rituals.” The little creature answered with her eyes cast down at ground knowing that this was wrong, but unwilling to disobey her master.

“Very good, while their elf is away, I need you get something from their quarters.”

“No! Bessie will not steal! Stealing is not allowed!” Bessie answered with a hint of defiance in her voice.

“Fine, you will locate an object for me and tell me where it is.”

The young master’s command was permissible and there was no way the elf could disobey it.

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From his vantage point hovering amongst the trees, Harry could hear shouting and cries of help and disbelief coming from the rubble. There were several pops of Apparition.

Taking a gamble, Harry lowered his Occlumency barriers. He wanted to get a taste of Riddle’s panic; instead, he felt nothing. Was Riddle dead? He couldn’t feel *anything*. He remembered his promise to Susan to do the deed and leave, but he needed more information. Quickly, he landed the carpet and hid it and the other items in the bushes surrounding a large oak tree. He committed the tree’s location to memory, so he could Apparate back to it and transformed into his raven form.

Flapping his wings, he flew along the grounds and watched the chaos unfold. Smoke billowed from several areas as he searched for signs of movement in the wreckage.

“What do we know, Pettigrew?” One of the men demanded.

“I don’t bloody know! The wards activated and twenty seconds later there was an explosion?”

“Did one of the Muggle flying machines crash into the building? Or was someone conducting a forbidden experiment?”

Pettigrew flailed his arms in the air. “Maybe, I don’t know. If it did, there would be more wreckage! The outer wards wouldn’t have tripped first if someone was doing something inside? I’ve already told a few to spread out and search for survivors. I’ll go to the warehouse and let Mulciber and Rookwood know what’s going on. We’ll need them!”

Lestrangle clearly didn’t like being ordered about by Peter, but he did as he was instructed. Harry quickly flew back and grabbed his wand. He had a window of opportunity to eliminate someone. Quickly, he changed his hair color and cast one of Flitwick’s glamour charms over his face.

He Apparated near Lestrangle, who spun around with his wand in his hand.

“Pettigrew sent me from the warehouse.” Harry lied, shocked at how easily it came to him. The last member of the Lestrangle family lowered his wand.

“Good. Spread out and search for survivors. Keep an eye on the perimeter. We don’t know if this was an attack or some kind of accident!”

Harry waited until Lestrangle had turned back to the rubble he was examining. This wasn’t dueling. This was killing. He didn’t intend to give Rabastan a chance.



“*Tonare!*” The blasting curse caught the Death Eater squarely in the back and he screamed in pain. Harry followed up with another one that caught him in the face and just like that the family LeStrange was no more.

A masked Death Eater appeared. “I heard screams over here.”

“He was too far gone. It was better to finish him.”

“Oh ...,” the Death Eater groped for something to say. Harry felt a momentary pang of anxiety and squashed it.

The Death Eater looked around. “So what do we do now?”

“I’m not sure. Was the Dark Lord here? Should we be looking for him?”

“I heard he went overseas. Man isn’t this all buggered up!”

Harry didn’t like conversing with the man. It made what he was doing more personal. Instead, he looked towards the trees and said, “Over there!”

“What?” The man said spinning to look. The poor fool never saw the cutting curse coming.

Harry moved quickly to the body and pulled off the mask. The dead eyes of Curtis Warrington stared back at him. He had just graduated last year. It shook Harry slightly. He had just killed someone he went to school with. Fitting the mask to his face, he Apparated towards the portion of the building that was still standing.

“Did anyone get the prisoners out?” He asked the two Death Eater’s near him.

One replied in heavily accented English that he didn’t know. “Find out then. Bring any down there to this location, now!” Harry bellowed impatiently. He pulled the empty sack off of his belt. “Wait! When you get them up here, we need to transport them to a new safe location. Use this Portkey. *Portus!* I’ll leave it right here, now move it!”

Apparently, being a Death Eater was all about attitude. The one way Portkey would deposit them in front of Auror Headquarters.

Harry was able to catch one more isolated Death Eater and dispatch him. 'Dispatch' sounded much better than 'kill' or 'murder'. He tapped the mask on the dead man's face and turned it into a Portkey with the same destination. That should catch one more off guard. Harry saw that multiple people were Apparating and Portkeying in. It was time to go. Reappearing at his stuff, he rolled up the magic carpet and put it and the mask into the trunk. One last Portkey a tired Harry Potter appeared outside of Auror Headquarters.

Quickly he walked in the door and saw the old witch manning the front desk. Beyond her, he saw Lavender briefing the morning shift leader. The witch looked up at him. "Can I help you?"

"I'd like to report a Death Eater sighting."

"Where?"

"If I'm right, they'll be right outside the building in a few minutes. They might have some prisoners with them."

"What game are you playing at boy?"

"Listen I'm serious! Any minute now some Death Eaters will be showing up outside."

"Get out of here!"

Harry shook his head, realizing that he was fighting a losing battle. Fine, he'd handle it. Susan wouldn't like it, but he could honestly say that he tried to delegate this.

Still muttering, he walked outside leaned on the wall and waited for the festivities to commence.

"Waiting for your Death Eater's to appear?" a familiar voice asked.

Harry looked back at Lavender and she shrugged. "The front desk reported some idiot said a bunch of Death Eaters were just going to appear in front of Headquarters any minute now. Was that you?"

Harry sighed realizing that she didn't recognize him under the glamour. He shook his head. "Want to help?"

Lavender seemed rather amused and clearly did not believe him. Drawing her wand and putting on a look of mock seriousness she stood next to him. "I've got a bit before I need to get to class. Sure, why not! And where will they be appearing?"

"Right in front of the building. I figure I'll use the wall here by the steps as cover and pick them off with stunners. It'll probably be two of them with some prisoners. So don't use anything lethal."

She nodded and didn't say anything for a minute. "So, did you have a good time last night?"

Harry looked at her, "What?"

"Tossed back a few pints, dabbled with the potions? I'm just wondering how much you have to consume to come up with this bullsh..."

Lavender never finished as a group of five people appeared – two of them wearing Death Eater masks. Harry's stunners picked them off with practiced ease. He stepped past the shocked Lavender and summoned the duo's wands.

He was tired and more than a bit angry, but he still appreciated the humor in the situation. Turning back to look at the flabbergasted girl, he said, "You were saying?"

"Uh, uh ..." Apparently, he'd broken her.

"Why don't you go back inside and get some Aurors?" he offered encouragingly. She nodded dumbly and positively ran back inside.

The male prisoner he didn't recognize. He felt a bit of relief seeing the dull expression of Alice Longbottom. It was the last prisoner that

made him wary. How long had someone been impersonating Madame Rosmerta?

"Please have a seat on the steps and someone will be with you shortly." A third Death Eater appeared seconds later holding the mask in their hand. Harry stunned that one without a second thought. He handed Rosmerta one of the wands and asked her to keep an eye on them until the Ministry's finest responded from twenty meters away.

Grabbing his trunk and Apparating away, Harry was determined that he wasn't going to stick around to answer a whole bunch of questions. He had thought of leaving some kind of calling card, but in the end the confusion among the Death Eaters would serve Harry better. He knew he should hurry back before anyone missed him.

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Gasping from the spasms that had just racked her body, Narcissa's brain whirled and she began to piece together what had happened and what she was ... doing.

The Imperius curse creates a mental connection between the caster and subject. With Veela, however, the pleasurable end of this connection mixes with the aura of allure, which apparently affected *her* because of the connection. The power of that aura had caught Narcissa unaware.

The net result was Narcissa had lost the last twenty minutes of her life in reckless abandon. The two were lying on the carpet, next to the couch that they had fallen off of just moments earlier. Narcissa's skirt was hiked up halfway up her stomach; her blouse was on the floor and her undergarments were missing entirely! She vaguely remembered vanishing them. She regretted that; they weren't the cheap stuff!

Annette began to press her face back into Narcissa's crotch when Narcissa stopped her. Checking the link, she found her control was barely intact. Annette was glowing slightly and Narcissa retched a little, after realizing exactly what *she* had been doing to the French Veela to make her glow.

She struggled to disengage and pushed herself back up onto the couch. Annette was right after her, her hands seeking to massage and pleasure Narcissa. It was almost too easy to give in. No, she had to focus, but it felt so very good...

"No!" She said, reestablishing her control. She felt Annette begin to fight her and the sexual energy buffeted Narcissa, who found her own hands moving outside of her control over the other woman's body.

"Annette," she whispered horrified at the lustful sound of her own voice, "As much fun as this has been, there are three *men* outside and they're equipped to do a far better job. Why don't we invite them in?"

The look in the Veela's eyes convinced Narcissa that she could probably release her control and the woman was so lust-addled that she would still go along with it. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Annette didn't fight her control; the curse was always much more effective when someone was eager to perform the command. Narcissa recast the spell and then conjured a pair of feathers, which she animated to run across Annette's form. It would give her the necessary excuse to keep her wand in her hand when the men entered. Maybe she would stay and play with them. No! She couldn't entertain those thoughts!

She maneuvered behind Annette, focusing rather hard on keeping her own sense of control, as the woman activated the touchstone. The men stepped into the room with their wands out.

"We were worried..." A tall man said stepping into the room and stopping at the erotic scene in front of him.

'*Convince them.*' Narcissa thought as she nuzzled on the woman's neck, allowing her hand to do unthinkable things that made her glad she had her eyes closed. She listened to the exchange of French from the woman who was purring in pleasure and running her hands through Narcissa's hair.

"Hello gentlemen, Lady Malfoy and I were celebrating when we realized that we should spread the joy. Close the door!" As the

Veela's aura flared, an intoxicating feeling washed over her and despite her concentration, Narcissa found her hand detaching from Annette's breast and moving dangerously lower.

She valiantly tried to focus on the conversation.

"Madame Delacour, we don't want a repeat of last time." One of them cautioned.

"Nonsense, Henri," Annette purred. "We weren't caught *then* and we won't be caught *now*. Claude left this morning for state business in Amsterdam."

Narcissa filed this datum away for future use. She never knew when it might be useful.

"That was just us." Henri gestured to the other two men, who were already staring enthralled.

"Then we can Obliviate them later if need be. Right now, I am in no mood to argue!"

The Veela practically dragged Narcissa across the room to get to Henri. His protests weakened until he too was beginning to strip, along with the other two security guards.

Focusing on not getting 'caught up in the excitement', Narcissa barely managed to resist the energy rolling off the Veela. Regaining her composure, she helped the man underneath Annette, who was on all fours and fully engaged with the other two men.

Knowing that their friendship, if one could truly call it that, was over, Narcissa stepped across the room to a rack of medicinal potions. Selecting several vials containing 'Pepper Up' potions, she returned to the foursome. Annette reached out and grasped a vial, uncorking it skillfully with one thumb and, with the assistance of Henri, found a most unusual way of getting the potion into her mouth. She'd need her strength.

Damning herself for this depravity, Narcissa backed away and collected all their wands. Muttering an incantation, she cast a quick

glamour to hide the fact that she was braless and apparently had been wandering about in a snowstorm. Stepping out into the next room, she saw the receptionist was away from her desk.

Using her most powerful locking charm, she sealed the door and deposited the extra wands behind a shelf. The secretary came back in carrying a beverage. The woman was a rather plain-looking young woman with a pug face and greasy blonde hair. Trust Annette to hire such an average person to accentuate her beauty! She suddenly felt less guilty about what was happening back in the room.

Narcissa gestured to the sealed door. “Madame Delacour said that she will be in an important meeting for the rest of the day. You are to clear her schedule and make certain that the meeting is not interrupted. “

“Does she need me to go in and take dictation?”

Cissy resisted the urge to make a horrible joke about Annette being the one taking *dictation* – *and lots of it*. “No. I think this meeting is strictly off the record.”

The secretary nodded knowingly, placing the ‘In Conference – Do Not Disturb’ placard in the holder outside her office and sat back down eyeing her magazine. Narcissa started down the hallway. France was clearly off her social calendar for the foreseeable future.

After all this, retrieving Charles would be child’s play. She had bought them several hours to get out of France and get back to Hogwarts. Dumbledore’s bird would sing for Charles, or she’d spend the rest of her days figuring out a way to destroy it!

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Harry smiled at Tonks as he walked down the hallway, enjoying her double take. Tonks quickly checked her copy of the Marauder’s Map.

“*Where* have you been Harry?”

“Don’t ask and you can feign ignorance later. Let the Aurors know that whoever’s at the Three Broomsticks isn’t Rosmerta. She’s an imposter. I need to grab a shower before we head to class.”

The Aurors face hardened almost changing into a young McGonagall. “There will be no next time; you need to get someone else. If you can’t trust me enough to let me know what you’re up to, then you don’t trust me, period.”

Cursing, Harry hadn’t thought of that. Pointing at the door he said, “Inside. I’ll fill you in when I tell Susan.”

Opening the door, he felt a pang of guilt when Susan threw herself on him. He didn’t realize how stress she was under. *She doesn’t deserve to be put in these situations. She deserves better.*

“You okay?” he asked.

“Not really.”

Instinctively, he held her protectively. In his thirst for revenge and need to do something, he ignored her concerns and run roughshod over her. He had been a single minded teenager, who didn’t understand the impact of his actions on his *wife* – yet another reminder that he was too young to be married; too young to be a father. Had James Potter had ever felt the same way?

“Tonks, give us a few minutes. I’ll come get you and we’ll talk then.” As his bodyguard left, Harry knew the war could wait. The prophecy could wait. She had told him over and over again that she knew she couldn’t be the top priority in his life. It was only now, that he realized that knowing it doesn’t make her immune from the heartache.

He could give her priority right now. She deserved much more than that, but that’s all he had to offer.

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Hours later, Susan sat alone in their room and finished decompressing.



Harry and Tonks were up in the Headmaster's office, informing Dumbledore of what had happened.

There was a knock on the door. Susan checked the copy of the map posted on the wall. Neville was on the other side of the door.

She opened the door. "Hello, Neville."

"Hi Susan, I wanted to stop by and see if you're okay. The two of you were late to Defense and you looked like you'd been crying."

"I'm better now. Harry's up with the Headmaster right now. I'm sure the Headmaster will want to speak with you later."

Neville hadn't been in their room before. Normally, Harry would be training with Flitwick in the Room of Requirement, but something must be up.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

He decided to go with the kind approach. Susan was a nice girl. The two of them made a good couple. Neville admired the Potters.

"Not really, but I really appreciate you stopping by. Would you care for a spot of tea? Oh sorry, my elf is with the other castle elves right now. I've got a few biscuits and some Honeydukes?"

"Thanks."

They made polite conversation for a few minutes before Susan started to sniffle. He had spent an adequate amount of time in the greenhouse among some of the plants he knew Susan was allergic to.

"Excuse me for a minute. I need to powder my nose." Susan stood up after her third consecutive sneeze.

He watched her go into the bathroom and leapt into action. He walked out of the view of the paintings and opened the upper right hand drawer. The black jewelry box was buried under several books. He quickly opened it and slid the necklace that once graced Penelope Clearwater's neck into his pocket. He had use for a dark artifact that

could control another. He decided to stay over there and look at the books on the shelves. There were several rather questionable tomes on the shelves that would impress his Uncle.

"I'm sorry. Were you just in the greenhouses?"

"Most of the afternoon, why?"

"I have a problem with some of plants. Their pollen really gets to me. I had to take a potion."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'd completely forgotten. No wonder you stopped taking Herbology."

She smiled, "Pretty much as soon as I could! I don't mind the subject, but it seems to have an issue with me."

Neville laughed heartily and promised to come back only on days when he wasn't out in the plants.

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Pansy was coming back from her bath in the Prefect's bathroom. That luxury was one of the best things about this castle. Someone was sitting on the steps. *'Great! What a mood killer, bloody Longbottom!'*

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked coldly. He was holding a very pretty necklace in his grubby hands.

"Just leave me alone." He snapped at her.

She started to walk by him, but found her eyes drawn to the necklace. It must have some kind of attraction on it.

He suddenly said something totally unexpected. "I was in love with Luna. I was going to give her this. It's been in our family for years."

She wanted to mock him, but the words stuck in her throat. Then he really surprised her. "I'm sorry. You're still in love with Draco, aren't

you? I shouldn't have used that against you the other night. I had no right..."

"It would be easier if he was gone and I didn't have to see him sniffing the Head Girl's crotch every day."

"Do you want to talk about it? I won't say anything to anyone, besides who'd believe me, anyway?"

Pansy found that she *did* want to talk about it and Longbottom was a good listener. They talked for a few minutes and she *did* feel a little better about herself. She allowed herself a brief smile when he said that Draco didn't deserve her. The time had slipped away before she knew it.

"I have to go and get ready for patrol."

She stood to leave.

"Pansy, can I ask you a favor."

"What?"

"The one thing I really wanted to do was put this around Luna's neck and see the expression on her face. I know this is stupid, but would you mind if I put it on you for a second and pretend? I swear I'll never mention this to anyone."

The dolt looked sincere. Maybe if she closed her eyes, she *could* pretend for a second that he was Draco and the jewelry would really compliment her neckline. Looking down the stairs to make sure no one was coming. She looked back at him.

"Go ahead, just be quick."

Pansy felt him fumble behind her for a moment. She dreaded that he would push her down the steps by accident, but instead the elegant, warm necklace slid around her neck as he fumbled with the clasp.

There was a wet sticky feeling on her neck. "What's that?"

“Sorry, I cut my finger on the clasp.”

“That’s disgusting! Get it off me!”

“Be quiet!”

Pansy instantly shut up. She wanted to say something, but found that she was physically unable to open her mouth.

“You’re *mine* now, bitch! I *own* you. I always figured I might need a patsy, but a Pansy will do in a pinch.”

Pansy turned and looked at him. She wanted to vehemently deny it, but he looked so powerful, so commanding. She couldn’t refuse him; she didn’t want to.

“Say, ‘I belong to Neville Longbottom’. Say it and be happy about it.”

Part of her wanted to scream for help, part of her wanted to draw her wand and curse him until he was nothing but a quivering mass of flesh, but instead, she felt her mouth widen into a big smile and she giggled as she said proudly, “I *belong* to Neville Longbottom.”

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Clutching his bloodied hand and sagging to the ground after twelve grueling hours in a confined space with two women and two dead bodies, Lord Voldemort was exhausted. Another lie that the ‘light’ always perpetuated was that ‘dark’ magic was an easy path for those who weren’t willing to give the effort.

He had to congratulate the person that concocted that utter drivel. Even today, people still look to ‘dark’ magic for easy solutions. They are the idiots and thank the powers that be for them. If it weren’t for them, his forces would be barely half their current number.

There are no ‘easy’ rituals. Well, that’s not entirely true. More specifically, there are no ‘easy’ rituals that are worth a damn. If a wizard or a witch wants to perform a useful ritual, they had better be ready to withstand pain, suffering, and exhaustion – and then be faced with uncertain results. Dark magic requires persistence,

dedication that borders on obsession, and the willingness to overlook past failures.

It is true that in many rituals, one can greatly ease their burden by using the sacrifice of others – sometimes figurative, but most often a literal sacrifice is necessary.

Of the two women in the room, one understood it all too well. Dahlia was a shell of a woman, like an old wand with a nearly extinguished core. Somewhere along the line most practitioners of the Dark Arts realize that magic is not something to be squandered without care or cost.

Picking himself off the ground, he looked at the old crone, who had one eye closed, but the one pale orb stared at him.

“What do you think?”

“Sumptin be wrong wit dat woman’s body – mebbe tainted wit old blood magic. Dat, wat be takin so much from us. Could be eider way, maybe da Revenant be weak and patetic or it go da otha way and your enemy be sufferin the consequence, Snake Mon.”

Monique left the room to fetch a second round of potent restoratives. The feline enhanced witch carried herself with a slight air of superiority out of the room, but then again, she had only assisted in the ritual, rather than being drained as a principal.

“She be goin wit you Snake Mon! Dis I know. She still like dem shiny coin. Dey still mean sumptin ta her. I not stand in her way, but you tich her to make da great zombies. Da same story wit all the young ones. Dey want da power and dey wants it now. Dey got no appreciation for wot it takes!”

Voldemort nodded to her. He had considered contracting out some Necromancy positions to speed up production. Over half of Peter’s helpers had never made an Inferii before. The state of reanimation practice in Europe was truly deplorable.

The other eye opened. “I be trusting you wit her. She not nearly as good as she tinks, but she need to be learnin more dan she be

learnin 'ere. Take 'er idiot friends wit you too! Dey seem to tink dat when Old Dahlia be dying dat dey run dese islands like some kind of council. It don't work like dat and you and I know it! Almost make Dahlia want to stay around as de ghost an watch dem all kill each other. De rest I don't care noddin 'bout, but you not be marking my girl, even if she be beggin you!"

Fifteen minutes later, Monique returned with two steaming flagons of a restoring draught. He felt the strength slowly seep back into his body.

"Girl! Go send word to your cousin. Tell him I be spectin im 'ere in two days when you be leavin."

The witch looked momentarily surprise, "But grandmamma, I hadn't even decided..."

"You be deciden de moment de Snake Mon show up at de door. You always talkin about da Power." The woman gestured with her gnarled fingers directly at him, "Well, dere's da Power right dere."

Voldemort turned away, ignoring the bickering between the two women. He wondered what the going rate for a group of Voodoo priests and priestess was these days. Instead, he looked at the bodies. The body of James Potter was shrouded in mist and slowly fading from view. When the mist lifted, only those that shared the Potter bloodline would be able to see it. Lily's body remained unchanged. He could try again, but he really didn't want to part with another finger.

Suddenly, the lights dimmed and the air swirled around the room. It felt like someone punched him in the stomach and he sank back into the circle of runes the crone had drawn on the floor with his severed finger and the fresh blood of seven chickens.

The mist rolled in like a fog and filled the room with haze. A rushing sound filled his ears like the passing of a train. All the mist was suddenly sucked into Lily Potter's body.

He spared a glance to see that the Island Queen was in far worse shape than he, as he staggered to his feet. Amazingly, the Lily's eyes

were already open and they regarded him, not with the dazzling green hue that Lily Potter had been known for in life, but instead with obsidian darkness.

The crone on the floor cackled weakly. "Oh de enemy dat be sharing de blood be in for it now!"

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## Chapter 34 – It's Like Mick Jagger Says ... I can't get no satisfaction

*Friday September 13, 1996*

Albus Dumbledore removed his spectacles with his one remaining hand. He set them down on the desk before him and rested his head the palm of his hand. Taking a moment to compose himself, he carefully gauged his next words for fear of damaging the fragile partnership that remained between him and the young wizard on the other side of his desk.

He was impressed, yet frightened at the same time. Did Harry speak to Professor Binns and utilize his unhealthy fascination for Goblin history? Or did he approach the Goblins directly through his political connections? During the Goblin revolts, they would use crude iron battering rams to sap the power from a place fortified by magic and have Trolls and Giants move ingots of the unshaped metal into the ward zone as they weakened and eventually drained the strength of the protective magic.

Except for a few legends of hostage rescues and the like, no one had ever thought to use cold iron to merely temporarily disable a set of wards. Harry had created a momentary hole in the Death Eater wards and filled it with several Muggle bombs. The wards never had a chance to recover before they were destroyed. It was a terrifyingly revolutionary idea.

"Harry, part of our side's problem is that we have become too factionalized. There is the Minister and his group. There is myself and the Order. Finally, there is -- you. Admittedly, you are the one with the best of intentions. You simply wish to end the war as quickly as possible."

Albus couldn't really call Harry his student. Truth be told, he had never taught him anything. The conversation was headed in the wrong direction, but it needed to be said.

"What are you saying?" Harry asked his voice rising in anger. "You'd rather we sit back and do nothing? Should I have waited until they recast the charm and it became useless? Forgive me for trying to



take the battle to the enemy and rescue more hostages. I only wish we could have gotten Neville's father back as well."

Albus nodded sagely. Indeed, Harry had a knack for accomplishing the unthinkable. "I had not considered that you would have been able to extract this information from Peter's mind. I simply wish you had conveyed this to me first."

The level of hostility increased. Even the young and emotionally scarred Metamorph assigned as Harry's bodyguard looked at him suspiciously.

"I couldn't exactly come out and tell you now, could I? I can't talk out of both sides of my mouth like you! Tell me, what would you have done with it if I had?" Harry demanded pounding a fist on the desk.

"That is a matter of conjecture, but we could have had you infiltrate one of our portraits in there, under glamour, in effect placing a spy within his war room. We could have learned the rationale behind his recent spate of abductions. It also could have alerted us when Tom was in his headquarters to maximize the effectiveness of your attack. The point I am trying to make is that we need to trust each other ..."

Harry laughed derisively. "This goes both ways, Dumbledore! Or do I need to remind you how you tried to keep me from the reading of Sirius' will and being emancipated. You waited four years to tell me the real reason Voldemort was trying to kill me! *Where's your trust?* Where's all the information *you* were supposed to share?"

He met the young man's eyes and found them filled with anger and resentment. He dared not mention how much they reminded him of another wizard, some fifty years ago. Such a statement would not be taken well or considered helpful. "In the recent weeks, I have sought to rectify that. I have included you in the Order meetings and given you the run of the castle. We are both to blame for the gulf that exists between us. I don't know if you are familiar with Mr. Franklin's famous quote, 'We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately', but it is no less true today. It is not within my power to convince Minister Scrimgeour to coordinate his efforts with us, but you and I *must* start working together. Tom has grown beyond my ability to contain. We both know that I am no longer a match for him.

For the moment, neither are you. Filius has been keeping me abreast of your progress and I fully intend to begin participating in your sessions to further hone your ever-improving skills."

He had tried to steer Harry away from the bone of contention. For a moment, he thought he had succeeded.

"I still don't understand why you're upset about this," Harry exclaimed. "He's the one looking for a new headquarters. He's the one forced to put the pieces back together for a change!"

"Fine, in the spirit of establishing our trust, I *will* tell you what worries me Harry. Imagine fifty Death Eaters mounted on brooms. Could they duplicate your attack on this castle, the Ministry, or the Wizengamot while it is in session? How much of a payload could an enslaved Dragon carry? Today the Goblins are your allies, but do not think that they won't add this tactic to *their* arsenal when the next uprising occurs. Think about the average family home, would those structures and their present wards hold against an aerial bombardment? I can speak with a certainty that this castle cannot. I will have to divert resources to ensure that it can. Next, I will have to weigh the options of if and when to inform the Minister, so that he can do the same. Our preparations will most likely not go unnoticed and Tom's forces will eventually identify what happened and refine your plan; perhaps even improving upon it. Single-handedly, your actions have escalated the scale of this war and now all sides must reevaluate their level of readiness."

Internally, Albus chided himself. He shouldn't have laid this burden on Harry. Wizards rarely attack from the air against a fortified structure. He hoped and prayed that Tom would not adapt this 'carpet bombing' to his needs. Now he found that he was berating Harry for scoring a victory. He needed to correct this, immediately!

"I apologize, Harry," Albus said contritely. "You were victorious today. You rescued three hostages and delivered a fearsome blow against our enemy. We shall move forward and learn lessons from our successes to prevent them from being used against us. We will talk again tomorrow. For now, go and rest."

Dumbledore watched the young man leave along with Tonks. Already, he began thinking of a ways to reinforce the wards protecting the school. Anti-broom wards are only effective up to a range of a thousand feet. Until a suitable playing field could be cordoned off, Quidditch might need to be cancelled. Perhaps, a hidden dirigible with the wards anchored to it would surprise those who thought to fly above the limits of an earthbound anti-broom ward? Albus loved a good mental challenge, but would rather not have had this one this evening.

He gestured to his faithful companion, Fawkes. He needed a breath of fresh air. But first, he needed to use the Floo.

"Arabella? Arabella, are you still awake?"

"Albus, good heavens! Is something wrong?"

"It would be far easier to list what is right these days. May I come for a visit?"

"Certainly, would you care for a spot of tea?"

"That would be nice."

He always enjoyed traveling with Fawkes. It was exhilarating. Arabella had relocated a few days after the Dursleys had left.

The old woman and her cats regarded him as he appeared. He could see the pity and shock in her eyes when she saw his missing arm. She held a horrified hand to her open mouth.

"Please don't concern yourself with my injuries. They are of no consequence."

"What brings you here this evening Albus?"

"The same thing that brought me to you all these years ago, my dear, I need Harry watched."

"What do you mean?"

“He was able to leave school today and risked his life to attack the enemy. I salute his courage, but I cannot allow myself to be caught unaware by his movements.”

“Surely, he will suspect me if I show up at the Castle.”

“Ah, but we have several copies of this wondrous object called the Marauder’s Map. It will allow you to sit in a room inside the castle and monitor his movements. In fact, I will be contacting several more members of magical families that were unfortunately not blessed with the ability to perform magic. Officially, you will be brought to the castle for your own protection; due to rumors that Lord Voldemort is specifically targeting those that society has chosen to call Squibs. Unofficially, you will be following Harry’s movements and alerting me in the event he attempts to leave.”

After discussing a few more details and the names of other Squibs, whom Arabella deemed reliable enough for this task, Albus returned to his office. He was not a happy man. Albus regretted that this was necessary, but trust would only go so far in times of war.

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Lord Voldemort was *not* a happy man. He surveyed the damage to his headquarters. The Fidelius Charm over such a large structure had forced him to significantly reduce the potency of the other wards. Much of what was keeping the remaining structure from collapsing was the fading magic in the walls.

The three stories above ground were in shambles. Whole sections of walls were missing. Windows with unbreakable charms on them were simply blown outwards, intact frames and all. A few had even shattered, making him wonder at the sheer power required to overcome the magic. Unbreakable is as much a misnomer as the Muggle word ‘bulletproof.’ The thick stone walls had buckled away from the impact zone, adding to the instability and the crater dug well beyond where his main chamber had been on the first level. Had he been there at the time, the war would have been lost. Doubtless, Peter would be distraught over the loss of his table, but it was useless, now that the headquarters was effectively destroyed.

He'd miss his chair, though. It was quite comfortable and the charms work on it had been precise. It would be hard to replace that level of craftsmanship.

Moving closer to inspect the damaged stones, he was struck by the scope of the devastation. They were pitted and cracked in places with layers of dust and soot staining the surface. The material looked as if it had been coated by a corrosive and instantly weathered a century. Using a quick cleaning spell, it became apparent that there was ferrous material driven with incredible force into the rock. It reminded him of his wanderings through Europe after he had finished Hogwarts. He saw firsthand the ruins of Dresden and various other Muggle cities that were a testament to the Muggle's never-ending quest to find new and better ways to kill each other.

Upon arriving at the warehouses with the seven Jamaican Necromancers, he discovered that much of the activities associated with headquarters were suddenly being performed there and interfering with the production of the undead horde. Twelve of his followers, including Rabastan, were dead. Thus, he set out to find Peter and learn first-hand what had happened. His anger was tempered by the continuing pain inflicted by the presence of the Revenants. Until they were closer to Potter, they would persist in drawing energy from him. Leaving them at the warehouses, he already felt passably better, knowing that the boy would soon begin to feel the nausea that *he* had endured during the return journey.

James and especially Lily will feed upon his energies, draining him. They will infest his mind and inflict psychic torture upon him, depriving him of rest. Ultimately, Voldemort would release them and allow them to stalk Potter. All of Potter's allies will be powerless to help him against an unseen enemy and his considerable magic will be useless – a prime example of why family betrayal amongst Voodoo practitioners is such a rare occurrence.

The bellowing of instructions caught his attention and diverted him from his pleasant fantasy of what will happen when his creations were deployed.

“Well take three more with you and reinforce that passageway! If that stanchion goes, we’ll lose most of this section! You there take two men into the forest and gather more lumber for support braces. Cut it and shape it out there. Something’s interring with our Transfiguration.”

He decided to intervene, “That would be the large amount of iron, Peter. Report!”

The rat Animagus looked frightened by the appearance of his master. “Milord, the structure is still holding, but we seem to be fighting a losing battle ...”

“Yes. It does appear that way. What do we know of the attacking forces?”

Peter hesitated a moment and slowly started as if forcing himself to speak these words. “We do not know. I spoke with Rabastan after the attack occurred and while I was gathering reinforcements from the warehouses. When I returned, he had been killed by a blasting curse. A second one of your followers was found near him, killed by a severing curse from behind. The last one killed, not by the explosion, was found at the edge of the wards. When Roland Yaxley attempted to identify him, Yaxley disappeared and we detected traces of Portkey activation. Several others are missing, along with the prisoners. I have requested any information from our sources at the Ministry, but they have been unusually quiet.”

Lord Voldemort looked at the predawn sky. It was either done internally, or someone had divined a method for breaking Peter’s hold on the secret. Instantly, it hit him - Potter! Voldemort cursed his oversight! The boy had *been* in Peter’s mind. He had done exactly what Voldemort would have done in the same situation; extracted as much damaging information as he could and then used it. That explained the Minister’s recent success in locating his safe houses.

“Peter, salvage what we can from here. The site is lost to us until the metal contamination can be removed. We will simply seize a new site. Now tell me, what should we do with this destroyed building?”

"I have a ten person detail working here. We can remove this contamination, if that is your wish?"

"No Peter, I have no wish to stay in a place where we would be reminded of a defeat. You are obviously too personally involved to appreciate the bounty around us. Think about it! Use that critical thought process, you're always talking about. What happens, if you stop trying to prevent the structure from collapsing?"

"The rest of the wards will collapse, even the Fidelius charm."

"Go on, tell me what happens next?"

"The site would be exposed to the world at large."

Voldemort could see Peter thinking hard and starting to get a glimmer of what might happen. "Go on Peter, you're getting closer."

"The Ministry would investigate ..."

"Indeed they would, especially if they were tipped off by one of our sources in the Ministry."

"But why Master? Why would you want them to come here? They would check for hidden wards. It would not be suitable as a trap."

"What if I instructed you to select five of the new recruits and order them into the town and have them charm some of the locals? Say, about thirty or so. They would bring them here and dress them in the garb of my followers and appear to be part of a crew that is fixing this place. How would the Ministry react if their scouts found almost two score of my followers in a single place at one time?"

"They would attack in force, Milord. Scrimgeour would attempt to overwhelm us with numerical superiority."

"Quite so, he would bring the full wrath of his forces against this site. They would all be here. Now, tell me Peter, where would we be?"

His minion finally understood, "Anywhere we wanted to be!"

“Precisely, battles are fought. They are won and they are lost. Adversity is the truest test of a cause like ours. That said, we shall endure this hardship and turn it to our advantage.”

He could see that Peter had relaxed. Being relaxed is how battles are lost, so he continued. “Indeed, I am angered by losing this site. You were in charge of our headquarters and that makes this defeat something you must own and answer for. I do not have the luxury of time to properly *reward* you for this failure, Peter. Therefore, I will simply state that you have a chance for redemption, but you have no further room for disappointment. For you see, your fate rests in your own hands now. Fail me again and I will be forced to do something rather unsavory to you in front of the rest, but it will be the result of your actions. You have already served with dedication. That alone is what preserves your life at the moment. I’m asking for you to serve with distinction now.”

Voldemort could see the fanatical gleam sharpen in Peter’s eyes. He rose to the top by manipulating people and getting more out of them than they thought possible. The Muggle books Peter enjoyed were written by rank amateurs compared to what he was capable of. It was time to drive that point home. “Yes Peter, you are a *wizard of destiny*, for you hold the means to your salvation in the palm of your hands. How do you want history to remember you, as a loyal follower, whose failures doomed him to death or even worse mediocrity? Or would you rather be known as a legend in your own right – a testimony of a wizard that not only survives adversity, but thrives in it! Do you insist on being known Wormtail, a betrayer of his ‘so-called’ friends? Or shall you become *Silverclaw*, a wizard who seized opportunity when it presented itself?”

Moments later he watched the zealot scurry off to implement his latest orders. He had no doubt that if he insisted that Peter would gladly stay and lead the expendable detachment, but he had other uses for that level of blind loyalty. Still, it had been a nice headquarters.

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She couldn't take it anymore. No one should have to endure this kind of torture. Even with earplugs and a localized silencing charm on her body, the cursed song of that monster penetrated her stained soul. Each trilled note a cold, cruel, mocking reminder that Narcissa Black would never be considered 'pure of heart.' She let Charles' hand fall from her grasp, realizing that she had been holding it so hard her own hand was bruising.

Retaining what composure she could manage, she staggered away from the caterwauling monster that had tormented her these past two days and out of the immediate area. Charles still hadn't awakened, but she held onto the hope that he would break the chains in his mind. She had even gone as far to ask if Pomfrey would hold open his eyes so that she might attempt to use the little Legilimency that she knew.

Neither the Mediwitch nor the Headmaster would allow such a dangerous course of action, but the suggestion *had* generated a slight thaw with the violently temperamental Molly Weasley. Narcissa understood; most any mother would understand being angry with someone returning with one of your children at death's door. Were it Draco in her lover's place, she doubted that she would have refrained from violently cursing someone.

Molly barely acknowledged her, but Arthur placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and handed her a note with an appreciative smile. How Lucius would be turning in his grave now to see his trophy wife courting the favor of people who he deemed little better than animals? Of all the people who she had seen since arriving, only four had greeted her with anything less than contempt and suspicion - Dumbledore, Arthur Weasley and the Potters.

As she opened the note, she was struck by the change in Harry Potter. When they last saw each other at her cousin's will reading, he was full of fire and brimstone. Vehemently, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the way he had been treated. Now, he was colder, like the heat of his experiences had tempered him – forging him not unlike a sword. They had asked her to come by as soon as she could for 'family' business. Adjusting her hearing protection, she looked at the writing on the slip of parchment.

*Draco Malfoy will be in detention with Professor McGonagall this evening for poor behavior during class. Minerva says that you know the way to her office all too well.*

AD

Indeed she did. Over two decades ago, a young witch, betrothed to the scion of a rich and powerful family had developed quite a mouth and an attitude during her final year. She had been reasonably talented, gifted in beauty, but lacking in both tact and modesty. Though she would like to pin her son's poor development solely on her deceased husband, there was quite a bit of Black in the boy. Prying eyes and ears had prevented any reunion for these last few days.

The castle teemed with life, but seemed to have a nervous energy. She likened it to a teakettle nearing boil. She understood that there had been deaths here this year, which was a departure from the last war. Perhaps, it was the fact that their savior was a student here. It was different from the last war and she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Her presence was supposed to be a secret; so naturally, she assumed that virtually everyone knew she was here.

Tapping her hand against the door, she heard Professor McGonagall's simple command to enter. It struck Narcissa how state of a person's office is often indicative of their personality. McGonagall's was immaculately clean and orderly, but devoid of any warmth. It was the kind of place that one felt uncomfortable in – exactly how she remembered it. She ignored the woman and focused on the young man scrawling lines on a paper. He'd grown a bit and added some more muscle to his frame.

The scrawling stopped and his eyes looked up and regarded her.  
"Hello, Mother."

"Hello, my son."

McGonagall stood. "I will leave the two of you alone."

There was an awkward moment of silence between lingering as the old witch left them alone. He stood and gave her a proper 'conditioned' greeting. It felt cold and distant, but perhaps that was her projecting her own insecurities.

"So the rumors are true, you've returned. They say you are holed up in the infirmary with one of the Weasley spawn."

"It's nice to see the legendary ability for this school to spread secrets and rumors remains intact. In this case, they are correct. My bodyguard is injured and I am hoping that the Headmaster's familiar can break the curse he is afflicted with."

Her son's face remained non-committal, "I see. Perhaps you should have discarded him like you discarded me? It would have been more in keeping with your best interests."

The comment stung her, but she had been expecting it. One thing she hadn't counted on was the frayed state of her emotions after suffering through days of Phoenix song. She sucked in her breath. "Is that what you think? I have never until this moment allowed myself to believe that I had given birth to an idiot."

"Well tell me *Mother*, what am I supposed to think? You send me away on a vacation. I return to find that you have left, Father is dead and you have apparently endangered me by spiriting off with a large amount of Father's money, while I'm forced to walk the halls with his murderer and keep a smile on my face."

"To borrow a phrase Lucius used all too often, 'I did what I needed to do'. Creating a rift between the two of us prevents you from being used against me and vice versa. I will point out that your father was not *murdered*. He was executed by Harry Potter; from what little he said to me, it involved payback for the rape and torture of one of his friends."

"I know what Father was capable of. He even let me watch."

"Bah! All you saw was him releasing his pent up aggression on some poor hapless soul, carefully selected and procured. If you want to talk about murder and slaughter, go fetch a Pensieve, Draco and I can

show you memories of the father you so adore and the foul creature he truly was. Would you really like to see that? How about what I have done? My hands are far from clean. Would you care to know how many Muggles I've killed and tortured for sport, all because I was doing what I thought was needed of me at the time. Care to know how we celebrated, the night I learned I was pregnant with you? We each killed two Muggles that night! Still, they were just Muggles, little better than beasts wouldn't you say?"

"Stop it!"

"No, you need to hear this. People beg for their lives before you kill them. It's sad and pathetic! Oh and it's a rush too – a feeling of god-like power to control someone's fate like that. Only later, that's when their cries will attack your conscience, but only if you let them. It's when they stop bothering you that you really should worry, but most are too far gone by then to care about the monster they've become. I actually have you to thank for stopping me. My pregnancy was difficult and I couldn't go out and participate in your father's games like I wanted to. Lucius even offered to fetch some and deliver them to the Manor so I could still enjoy my sport, but it just wasn't the same. I kept telling myself that I could go back to it after you were born. Instead I stayed to care for you. My conscience returned to me during those months and I found that I didn't like the person I had become. So, I invested myself in raising you and suppressed my urges to kill again. By then, your Father's master vanished. We were forced to become respectable and upstanding citizens again and hide our deviant behavior behind culture and civility."

Draco's face was tight with rage and flush with anger. "Damn you! Not another word! I don't want to hear it!"

Knowing she should stop, but unwilling to do it she continued in a low voice that neared a growl. "Did I coddle you too much? All those letters and packages, I've sent over the years, mayhap they were my desperate efforts to cling to what little I felt was right in my life. Perhaps I did more harm than good. Allow me to correct that. The truth is an ugly thing, my son. The great lie was the proud and noble Malfoy family with all the money, influence and power. The truth was that we were the ones who were savage beasts. We returned to our

exquisitely furnished cave and talked of our high society functions where we could sniff the tails of the other animals to see who was leading the pack. Well I'd had enough of that life! When your father went to Azkaban, I knew I had to get out and I did, but once you're this far in, they don't let you go without a fight and I've had to become a killer again, but this time I have something worth fighting for – my freedom.”

Her son was easily angered and often slow to understand. Today was no exception, “So that's why you're rutting around with a Weasley? Is that what this freedom is all about? Is being a common whore what you always wanted?”

“My relationship with Charles has nothing to do with what we've been talking about. It's about me looking in the mirror and seeing a person I can respect again.”

“Respect yourself? Now who's deluding themselves? No one's ever going to see you for what you are! You're not my Mother! I disavow you.” He started past her for the door, but not before Narcissa delivered a stinging slap to his cheek. He was momentarily stunned. Lucius had struck him plenty of times, but she had never in his entire life.

“I'll forget that you said that, Draco. You're young and believe you have all the answers right now. When you come to your senses and wish to see me again, I will welcome you.”

He stopped short of the door and spun back to her. “I'd rather die first.”

Her words chased after him as he flung the door and went into the hallway. “Be safe, my son, for words such as that uttered during a time of war have a way of coming back to haunt us both.”

The slamming door was the only response she received. Her heart ached at his rejection, but she had expected him to act this way. At least the rift would be quite believable. Hopefully, it would be enough to save him. She felt tired, drained and slightly nauseous. Part of her wanted to go back to her vigil, but she instead started towards her accommodations in the guest wing.

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“Should I send Trixie for Madame Pomfrey?”

Harry looked at his wife and set his utensils down from the meal he barely felt like eating. Training had been particularly grueling today, though he couldn't place anything that Professor Flitwick had done different, but he was exhausted and angered by his poor showing. “No, I'm okay. I just need to get some rest, preferably with your arms around me. We should get going if we want to make the DA meeting.”

Susan smiled. “I'm sure Hermione will understand us missing another DA meeting. We'll get there one of these days. As for the arms around you, that can probably be arranged, go ahead and shower. I'll try to finish my Transfiguration assignment while you get cleaned up. Have you started on yours?”

Harry shook his head. Somehow transfiguring wood into serviceable furniture and the differences in size, shape and decoration of the result could not hold his attention.

The shower was refreshing and Harry collapsed into bed, while Susan continued to work on her homework. He'd try to make an effort in the morning, but he knew Professor McGonagall would be lenient in this case. Tomorrow would be the first time Dumbledore attended one of his workouts. He couldn't afford to look bad in front of the man. He drifted off at some point hoping for a respite from the ever present problems no teenager should have to face.

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Susan slid into bed seeing Harry was already asleep and draped an arm over him. The other instructors were giving him a great deal of latitude. Unfortunately, that same latitude did not extend to her and her grades were definitely slipping. She breathed in the vanilla scent of his shampoo. It was only during the moments of quiet like this that she allowed any self-doubt to seep through.

Would Harry have chosen her if things had been different? If Mum had lived and she wasn't living under the threat of the end-of-line Marriage Clause, would he have simply chosen Ginny or someone

else? Would she have been one of those girls looking at Harry and his wife pass, whispering jealous things in their wake? People already treated her differently. She didn't want to think about how that would change after she started to show.

Rolling back onto her back she stared at the ceiling, agitated and tried to calm herself. Normally, she didn't get this worked up about things. If Harry was awake, he'd chide her and tell her to focus on what is rather than all the 'could have beens'. Still, she felt all this nervous energy. It was only when Harry first began to moan and thrash that she realized the genesis of her irritation.

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"I gave my life for this?" Lily Potter asked bitterly. "*This* is what my sacrifice bought? James come closer and see this wretched specimen. He's quite pathetic isn't he?"

"I swear Lily, that if he didn't look like me, I'd swear you'd slept with Snape. The future of the great and noble Potter line rests in his hands? It's disgusting."

Harry tried to deny these taunts, but they continued to berate him for what seemed like an eternity. He had heard his mother's voice before, with the Dementors and again in the Graveyard and was certain that it was her, but where he'd previously recalled warmth and love, there was now only a cold bitterness. His father seemed to take a backseat to the insults his mother hurled at him.

"I've had enough of this James, let's strangle him now. We brought this mistake into the world; surely it falls to us to remove it?"

Hands grasped at him as he thrashed against them. He was having trouble moving and breathing. "It will all be over soon, Harry. You'll come back to us soon, Harry. Come back to us, Harry. Harry! Harry!"

His mother's angry visage and red hair melted into his wife's distraught face. "Harry! Harry! Wake up! You were having a nightmare."

He tried to clear his thoughts and understand what was going on. “A nightmare?”

“Yes, you were moving all around and moaning. I sent Trixie for Madame Pomfrey when I couldn’t wake you.”

Harry noticed his hands were gripped on her arms. It hadn’t been his parents he was grappling with, but his pregnant wife. Instantly, he let go. “Are you okay?”

“Maybe a bruise or two, but I’m a big girl, I’ll put on some balm when the nurse gets here. What was the nightmare about?”

“My parents, they were trying to kill me.”

“Do you think this has something to do with that bastard stealing their bodies?”

“Maybe, I don’t know.” Harry felt awful. The ‘rest’ only seemed to make things worse.

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In the confines of a broom closet, Pansy had found being *owned* was not something that she particularly liked. Unfortunately, her ‘master’ had forbidden her from informing anyone of her predicament either directly, through voice, or writing about it. For the last day she had managed to leave a book open on her nightstand to an article on using items to ensnare a person, but her thrice cursed roommates were too self-involved to notice.

Worse still, he had just asked her if she had been trying to inform anyone about her predicament!

“Yes,” she heard herself say tonelessly.

“Tell me how,” his voice commanded.

She hated him, but she could not refuse.



"I have a book opened on my nightstand. The chapter is on the use of items to control another."

Neville looked at her and shook his head slightly. "Oh Pansy, it pains me to hear that. You just have to accept that your little Death Eater arse belongs to me now. When you return to your dorm this evening, you will close that book and never attempt to use that method again. Actually bring the book to me. I might be missing something. Now tell me about the fourth-years in your house. How many of them plan on becoming Death Eaters?"

Pansy shrugged, having already discussed the first through third years, "All of them I suppose."

"Don't you know?"

She was flustered. "It's not like we go around telling each other! We don't exactly have a newsletter or club meetings like your pathetic DA!"

"The DA is not pathetic! Say it!"

She heard herself repeat his words. It had been tempting just to say the word 'it' and see if she could anger him more, but she had to wait until some moment when she might find a way to betray him, and alone in a broom closet was not such a place.

"That's right my property, being a member of the DA means being brave, honest and noble. Arrgh, you're distracting me again. Tell me why you think all the fourth years are planning to be Death Eaters?"

She considered asking how brave, honest and noble sitting in a broom closet, interrogating a magical slave was, but opted not to. "The twins are both Yaxleys. Culver still idolizes Draco even after his betrayal. The Prestons are as Dark as they come, just better at disguising it. The list goes on. Every last one of the seven fourth-years has relatives who are known Death Eaters."

She watched Neville think this over as the door to the closet opened up. One of the Aurors assigned to the castle was there, clutching some kind of map. "You two have been in there long enough. Time to

move along, curfew is in thirty minutes. I'll be back along this hallway in ten minutes. You don't want to be here then. So, why don't you give your girlfriend a kiss goodnight and be on your way."

"We're just talking. She's not my...." Neville stammered.

"Don't really care, young man, whatever you're doing, just wrap it up and be out of here in ten."

The man shut the door.

Neville stared at her for about twenty seconds after the Auror had left. "He's right. People *will* talk. Kiss me."

At last, the two words she had dreaded him uttering since she found herself in this mess. She was almost shocked it had taken him this long to get to it. Pansy wished she could vomit on command. It would have been more enjoyable. Instead, she found herself leaning in and closing her eyes, hoping a quick peck would satisfy him.

It didn't.

"Again! Don't stop kissing me until I tell you, and enjoy it when you do."

Her arms wrapped around his neck, too bad it wasn't to strangle him. She found herself mashing her face into his and forcing her tongue into his mouth. Clumsily, he worked back against her, plainly demonstrating his complete lack of skill and experience. Despite any supporting evidence, she was cringing inside. Maybe she could string him out until the Auror came back? That would get them both into trouble. So she continued kissing moving off his lips and onto his neck. If he hadn't forbidden physical violence against him, she'd have take a shot at doing him vampire style. Instead, the best she could do was suck on his neck. Hopefully, it will bruise! She fantasized of him dropping dead right then until she realized she'd probably still be forced to kiss him.

A few minutes passed and she found her body disgustingly aroused, responding to his command, but she couldn't stop kissing him.

“Enough. Stop,” he croaked.

She was thankful the horror had passed. An extra long shower was in order tonight to scrub this vileness off of her. She opened her eyes and looked at her controller. He was breathing heavily and still had his arms around her. It was the glazed over look in his eyes that scared her.

“That was very nice, Pansy. You’re a very good kisser. Meet me here tomorrow night and we’ll discuss the fifth-years in your house and maybe we’ll kiss some more.”

They stumbled out of the broom closet and nearly collided with Draco. Just when she thought the day couldn’t get any worse!

“And here I thought you hadn’t sunk any lower, Parkinson. Longbottom! Hah! I’d offer you sloppy seconds, Longbottom, but I’m pretty sure that ship sailed a long time ago.”

Pansy wished she would die at that moment, but one of the first things he forbade was suicide. “Shut it Malfoy. Pansy here decided to move up to a *real* man. Go ahead Pansy tell him.”

That was her cue, the moment she’d been waiting for. “Draco, he gave me a necklace and it ...”

“Shut up, Pansy!” Neville said, and she did, cursing that she wasn’t quicker.

“He gave you a bauble? That’s all it took! Did she at least give you good sucking for it? Not that she’s particularly good at it. Oh this *is* just what I needed to cheer me up! Thanks for the laugh. She’s all yours now, Longbottom.”

She heard his mocking laughter as he walked down the hallway taking what little hope for rescue she had with him.

“That wasn’t very nice Pansy,” Neville said grimly. “I see I’ll have to be careful with you. If I tell you to speak, it is only about the current subject. You may never speak of the necklace unless I specifically direct it. Do you understand? Oh sorry, you can speak again.”

“Yes.”

“Good, I’m glad you can see it my way. Now go off and perform your Prefect tasks and I’ll see you tomorrow. You’re dismissed.”

Pansy started to go, but he stopped her. “Wait. Pansy, I’m curious that thing Draco talked about. Did you really do that to him?”

“Yes.”

She *had* to answer him. It only deepened her humiliation.

“Did you like it?”

“Not particularly, no.”

The act really didn’t do much for her and Draco wasn’t exactly one to return the favor.

“Then why’d you do it?”

“I did it to make him happy and keep him from straying,” she replied, wiping tears out of her eyes. She didn’t like where this was headed.

“Oh, don’t cry Pansy. I won’t ask you to do that.”

With a slight bit of hope in her voice she asked, “You won’t?”

That same insane look in his eyes was there. “No, I’ll just *tell* you to do it. If it helps, I’ll tell you to be *happy* about it.”

He walked away from her whistling.

She hated her life.

She hated everyone.

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“I heard a rumor about you and Parkinson. Please tell me it isn’t true,” Ginny grunted, coming up for another in her set of crunches during their morning workout.

Neville paused before answering her. "She likes me. We've got this connection. It's complicated."

"If you say so, but I'm worried about you. Are you sure you're not under some kind of spell?"

"Well, you've got your wand back, go ahead and give me a good checking over."

Ginny was thankful for having her wand back, finally. The Squib comments had really gotten to her. She suspected Chelsea Abbott was behind them, that vindictive little bint, who should be rotting in some Ministry hellhole somewhere!

The weeks going by without her wand had been agony. She felt like a part of her had been missing, but now she felt better, whole even. She waved her wand over him and cast a couple of aura detection spells. She even summoned a Pocket Sneakoscope that Bill had given her. If Pansy had some kind of hold over him, she couldn't detect it.

"Looks like you're clean. I hope you know what you're playing with."

"Trust me Ginny, if anyone gets hurt, it won't be me. Now come on, we need to hurry up and stretch before our morning run."

The youngest Weasley sighed and knew Neville would mistake it for her dislike for the laps. In truth, she had started to like Neville a bit and to know that he was dating that trollop really was disappointing.

They chatted while they stretched, as Ginny opted to make no further mention of Pansy Parkinson.

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"I had to ask your Phoenix to leave. The song seems to be upsetting Potter."

"I understand, Poppy, the need, but not the reason beneath it. It has never affected him in such a manner before. What have you learned about his condition?"

“He’s sleeping right now, but he barely falls asleep before whatever this is affects him. I’ve run the standard battery of detection charms on him for the few minutes he sleeps and whatever it is seems external, but it’s only momentary. He also appears to be very drained, but I’ve run blood samples through the potions and there is no indication that he has an illness or an infection.”

“Do you recommend Dreamless Sleep?”

“Not until I consult with some specialists. With your permission, I’d like to bring some of the Healers from St. Mungo’s here. It couldn’t hurt to have a few of them looking at Molly’s boy either.”

Albus had planned to duel Harry today, but the boy on the hospital bed looked horrible – a far cry from what the people at large expected from their savior.

As he watched, the young man began to shake violently and flail his arms. His wife, sitting in the chair next to him, drowsing, bolted upright and sent a small jet of water on him to wake him up.

“What was it this time?”

“They were trying to drown me,” he sputtered dejectedly.

“Who was trying to drown you, Harry?”

“My parents,” the wizard answered.

“Troubling. Madame Pomfrey says the diagnostic charms and potions indicate no sign of illness or infection and only a hint of external influence. Is it your parents each time?”

“Yes.”

“How is your Occlumency?”

“Fine.”

“When you launched your assault the other day, Tom was not there and you were told he was overseas.”

“We can only surmise that he has returned and whatever he has done with your parents’ bodies is behind this. I will look into this and make what discreet inquiries I can overseas. If we can find out where Tom journeyed to, it may give us a hint of what you are facing. It is likely some form of psychic assault. Until then, try and get as much rest as you can under the circumstances. We’ll give you and Susan some privacy.”

Dumbledore led Madame Pomfrey back to her office. “When Susan attempted to wake him, she used water and he thought his parents were trying to drown him. What have the other experiences been like?”

“Most times they are choking him.”

“And what is Mrs. Potter doing?”

“Shaking him – do you think that he is processing this as part of his dream?”

“It is as good a theory as any. When this next occurs, try having her use a stinging hex and see what his dream experience is. If he truly is processing his surroundings it may help us craft a method of combating this.”

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Sunday morning in the female fourth-year dorms in Slytherin were not especially comfortable. Of all the dorm rooms in ‘the Maze’, they were probably the worst positioned of all seven years and were rather cramped, but it was a rather convenient spot for all seven of the fourth-years to gather. They were known as a rather tight clique.

Amanda Yaxley set down her textbook she was idly reading and addressed the group. “You know what I’ve heard? They’re saying Potter has been holed up in the infirmary for a week with all kinds of specialists being brought in.”

“That’s a load of crap, Amanda. Daphne’s been toying with some Hufflewits and she said that Potter’s only missed Friday. Your source

is so weak.” Michael Culver answered from his position in Theresa Yaxley’s lap.

Theresa smiled, petting her boyfriend like a pygmy puff. “We could always ask Parkinslut. She’s humping a Gryffindor these days.”

All seven laughed until a voice interrupted them. “What exactly would you be asking me?”

“Bugger off, Parkinslut. We only talk to real Slytherins.”

“Wait, I know something we could ask her,” Renee Rookwood asked with her voice tittering. “Is there any difference in taste between Slytherin semen and Gryffindor?”

Pansy replied icily. “Longbottom’s the last of his family except for his brain-dead parents and very dead Uncle. He’ll be seventeen soon and have lots of land and money coming his way. Plus it irritates the hell out of that bastard Draco.”

“Here’s an owl for you, Pansy-wansy. Draco doesn’t care if you’re doing a herd of Centaurs before breakfast. He never has!” One of the others howled in laughter.

“How would you like to spend next weekend with Filch instead of visiting Hogsmeade?”

“Oh, going all Prefect on us. Are you sure you aren’t Hermione Granger in disguise? We’ll go to Vector and get it overturned.”

Pansy pulled out a coin purse, heavy with coins. “How about a contest? I ask you questions. Answer them right and you get gold. Answer them wrong and each one costs you an hour of detention next weekend. Any takers?”

“If you want to just give away the gold, we’ll take your money. Unlike your year, we’re not idiots.”

“Fine, meet me in Greenhouse Seven in ten minutes and we’ll start with Herbology.”



“So, screwing Longbottom has suddenly made you an expert. We’ll see about that, bitch.”

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“Alright, we’re here! Let’s get this over with before breakfast ends. What’s your first question?”

Pansy ignored the question and looked at the tiny elf cowering in the corner of the greenhouse. She had no desire to do this, no matter how much she hated the urchins, but she had even less desire to get caught. “Did they tell anyone they were coming here?” The elf shook her head no and she dismissed it.

“What’s this all about? You stupid bint!”

Pansy couldn’t hear them, due to the deadening effect of her disillusioned earmuffs, but she got the gist of what they were saying. “My first question is: can you identify this?” With a yank she pulled the full grown Mandrake from the pot in front of her.

Within seconds it was over and all seven were dead. If she was allowed, she’d yank her earmuffs off and join them, but that freedom she was denied. Instead, she levitated Amanda Yaxley over and positioned her by the potted plant and fitted a pair of defective earmuffs on the dead girl’s head. She would need to stop by and plant the stolen diary with the new entries written with a forgery quill in Amanda’s hand. It told a tale of a jealous twin who had been rebuffed by Culver in favor of her sister and the secret hatred she had for all her Slytherin classmates. It detailed her plan to make them pay. Part of her almost lauded Longbottom’s plan. It was so *believably* juvenile.

She also now knew that Travers and Goyle’s deaths weren’t the accidents everyone thought, though once again, she could tell no one. What irony that the so called ‘light’ side branded *them* as monsters.

She toppled the pot, spilling the still screaming Mandrake onto the ground. If she was suffering, something else should too! It also added to the image of the crime scene. A silencing charm would keep it quiet temporarily and wear off. She replaced the ‘Danger Mandrakes – Hearing Protection Required’ sign in the window and removed the

disillusionment charm on the stand of earmuffs outside the door. She shut the door and dropped the earmuffs into the rack and started her trek up the hill.

If she ever got this cursed necklace off, Neville Longbottom would die, slowly, by her hand.

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Ginny was surprised when Neville cancelled their morning workout. She was still so far behind him in his conditioning that he could skip the rest of this month and he would still be slowing down for her. Still, she was determined to reach his level.

At the moment, she was sitting on the bathroom stall relieving herself before her run. The door opened and someone walked in. She looked through the crack as someone went over to the wash basin and began fiercely scrubbing her hands, sobbing. Ginny edged closer and saw it was Pansy Parkinson. The witch wiped her eyes and then pulled her robes straight, revealing a beautiful necklace. Ginny saw the look of anguish on the Slytherin's face. It was at that moment, with a shudder, that Ginny remembered just where she had seen that particular necklace before.

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## Chapter 35 – The Hero Always Gets the Girl

*Sunday September 15th, 1996*

Neville looked up from the Potions textbook that he wasn't studying that hard. He had taken a quick breakfast and then returned to the Gryffindor common room, making certain that he was in plain sight. He greeted Hermione warmly and asked if she'd look over his assignment to see if he had missed any important points. He hadn't, but that was the beauty of an alibi. She'd remember speaking to him this morning and so would the anxious-looking Ron Weasley. Neville's ruse was costing Ron precious time which could be spent with the boy feeding his face.

"Neville, I'm impressed. Normally, I'd say it's worth an O, but your great uncle seems to have some very high expectations, so I'd probably say you'll earn an E. Still, it's a solid essay." Clearing her voice slightly and casting a glance at her boyfriend, she continued. "In fact, it's much better than some other people I know."

"C'mon, Hermione! Breakfast is half over!"

Secretly, Neville hoped he'd be there for the day that Ron's metabolism failed him. It would be nice to eat everything in sight and not have to worry about being chubby or fat. It was wrong to enjoy Weasley's squirming, but he just had to tweak him a bit more.

Fishing around in his bag, he pulled out a sheaf of parchment and held it out to the smiling witch. "You don't suppose you'd mind looking this over?"

"Oh, you've already got that done. Look Ronald, there are other people in this tower who actually get things done a day early. I do believe you wagered me at some point."

"And you refused the bet."

"I merely snorted derisively; I don't recall ever actually declining the bet. So, I do believe that you'll be carrying my bag for the rest of the week."

“No. You didn’t bet. I’m not carrying that library you’re always lugging around.”

She smiled slyly at Neville, “Well let’s let Neville decide. Neville, whose word would you take, a dutiful Prefect and exemplary student like myself, or Mr. ‘Far From’ Prefect over there?”

Despite himself, Neville chuckled. Carefully, he weighed his reply, “I’d have to go with Ron.” Ignoring her pout and Ron’s laughter, he finished, “You’d never gamble, plus you’re dating him, so you must be delusional at times.”

“Hey!”

“Oh, good show Neville! Do you mind if I take it down to breakfast and look it over?”

Neville smiled and watched her as she followed a perturbed Ron out the portrait hole. His little *sessions* with Pansy had given him a new appreciation for the curves of a young witch. A little smile played across his face as he imagined Hermione doing the same things to him that Pansy did. He couldn’t help but imagine that pretty necklace around Hermione’s slender neck.

“Neville! Are you okay?”

He hadn’t even noticed Ginny coming into the common room and cursed himself for his inattentiveness. “Oh sorry, Ginny, I was just thinking.”

“We need to talk.”

“About what?”

Her voice dropped to an urgent whisper. “Not here – in private!”

“The rest of the guys are down at breakfast. We can go to my dorm room.”

Neville was slightly worried. Ginny might have seen something on her morning run. He followed her up the steps, while evaluating his

options. So far, he hadn't been able to do a proper memory charm. He did make Pansy drool for five minutes the last time he tried it on her, but the effect was only temporary.

Once inside Ginny cast a weak privacy charm. "I saw Pansy this morning in the loo. Why is Harry using that necklace on Pansy? Is he using her to spy on the Slytherins?"

Neville froze for a moment, like a deer caught in the headlights. It took a second for his brain to start processing this. She thought Harry was behind it. It probably made sense from her standpoint. He opted to play along. "I can't really talk about this."

She smiled triumphantly, "I knew it! You're not really dating her. You're just meeting with her to get information and passing it to Harry! Why her?"

"Um, since she's a Prefect, she's got the run of the castle and her parents are Death Eaters. If Davis or Greengrass was going into a cupboard with me, it wouldn't be believable for a second, but everyone thinks that Parkinson's trying to make Malfoy jealous. You know you have to keep quiet about this."

Ginny paled. "I won't say anything, but I sure as hell am not swearing any more oaths!"

"Don't mention to Harry that you know either," he warned.

"I won't. He'd probably Obliviate me to 'keep me safe'. I'm guessing the Headmaster doesn't know about this either."

Neville shook his head and leaned closer. "Harry said there'd be no way he'd approve, so this is just between the two of us."

"She looked upset. You're not hurting her, are you?" Ginny looked repulsed by the idea of possession. Neville knew from her experiences both past and recent that she wouldn't be very agreeable to this type of magic.

"That's why Harry recruited me. I'm not that kind of bloke. Imagine what Seamus or Dean would do with a girl under their complete

control! That would be just – wrong. I could never do that.” He lied convincingly.

“So you don’t *do* anything with her?”

“Not really, we mostly just mess up each other’s clothes and hair after she gives me her report.” Ginny immediately flung her arms around him.

“I just knew there was no way you were really with her. She’s so awful and you’re such a great guy!”

He was much taller than the tiny witch. Neville relished in the feel of her arms willingly around him and the scent of her hair. She pulled back slightly and stared at him. He leaned in and kissed her. Ginny seemed startled at first, but then responded back. Neville had always liked her. The fact that her brothers hadn’t given him any grief over taking her to the Yule ball had been a sign of approval.

Breaking, he looked at her. “I’d much rather be in a closet with you instead.” The compliment earned him a blushing smile.

“But your cover – we can’t!” he smiled when she sounded disappointed.

“I know, but maybe we don’t have to run all those laps. If we stopped a little early we might have some time out there by ourselves. Besides, it’s starting to get chilly. There’ll be less and less people out that early in the morning.”

Ginny flashed him an impish smile and kissed him. Her wand vibrated telling them that someone had entered the perimeter of their privacy ward and heard footsteps going down the steps. He watched her bite her lip in a cute way before saying, “I’d like that. I’d better go grab a shower and change. Since today is Sunday, maybe we can fit an evening run in before sunset. I think that’s a great idea, don’t you?”

Neville smiled as Ginny turned and walked out of the room. There was no doubt in his mind anymore – he was a hero. The hero always gets the girl.

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“You deceitful little Jezebel, I do *not* approve of you! I’m warning you, you stay away from my son!”

“Personally, I don’t care if you approve or not. When Charles comes out of this, you can freely express your opinion to him. I doubt that I or even common sense could stop you. If he’s the man I believe he is, he’ll listen to your concerns and make his own decision.”

Susan and Tonks sat at the edge of Harry’s bed just outside of the silencing charm with the privacy curtains drawn listening to the argument rage. The Mediwitch had been summoned away rather urgently and it was the trigger for the two women to begin arguing – Narcissa Black’s sharp icy words versus Molly Weasleys fiery maternal anger. Ten minutes of females posturing over a comatose wizard and it was continuing to escalate. Were it not for Charlie Weasley’s condition, the situation would have been completely laughable.

“I’ll not have another of my sons led astray by a harlot! It’s bad enough he’s injured because I let him go with you. When he wakes up, he’ll be with family and you’ll not be disturbing him if I have any say so!”

Tonks started to draw a ‘point’ in the air with her wand and Susan shook her head no.

“Be that as it may, *Molly*, I will be here and there is precious little you can do to stop me.”

Both witches agreed to add a point to Narcissa’s tally. The current score stood at seven to three in favor of Narcissa.

“We’ve suffered enough already in this war because of people like you!”

As Tonks used her wand to spell out the word ‘Denial’ in the air, the shrill matron of the Weasley clan continued, “You’re nothing but a cheap, opportunistic whore. The moment your side was losing, you switched sides. You’d even abandoned your own child to serve your

selfish goals. You are nothing, and we Weasleys will have nothing to do with you!”

“Unlike you, I’m not entirely certain which side is *winning*. Furthermore, I would be careful about how casually you toss out words like ‘abandonment’ Molly, or was Percival basking in the love of his family when he met his unfortunate demise? Before you go for that wand remember this – the man that dared hurt Charles, I killed him. You might even recall his name – Antonin Dolohov. I believe he was partly to blame for Fabian and Gideon. Your son knows who I am and accepts me. His decision is the only one that matters to me.”

Susan watched her Auror friend’s face get serious. The argument had taken on a menacing tone. Wands could be drawn and in an infirmary, that was never a good thing.

Tonks opened the curtains and stepped out. “Aunt Narcissa, Molly, perhaps you should take this elsewhere. Your fighting is disturbing Harry, and I don’t really think either of you are helping Charlie recover at the moment. So why don’t one or both of you leave? To make matters easy, I’ll go ahead and make the decision for you – both of you leave.”

Several angry glares were exchanged, but the quarrelling women left. Tonks unfurled Harry’s copy of the Marauder’s Map and ensured that the two of them weren’t heading in the same direction. A series of three loud gongs reverberated through the castle. It was the emergency alarm, indicating to all students to immediately return to their dorms.

“Tonks! Should we try and find out what’s going on?”

The Auror stared intently at the Map in front of her, “No. My responsibility is to Harry. The Death Eaters know that he’s under some form of attack. They could be setting this up as a diversion. Several instructors and Aurors are at the greenhouses, and so is Dumbledore. Whatever’s happening is probably there. They wouldn’t sound the alarm unless it was serious. Keep your eyes on the passageway outside the infirmary. Shout out when you see anyone coming this way, and I mean anyone. They could use someone under



the Imperius curse. I'll disillusion myself and be to the right of the door."

"Should we wake Harry?"

Tonks looked back at Susan, "Not yet. I'm not sure he'd be any use in a fight right now anyway. Anyone threatening comes through that door and you banish these beds right at them. While they're busy dealing with that, I'll take them out."

Susan shivered. At first she thought it was involuntary and due to Tonks' bluntness, but then she realized that the room was really getting colder. Looking back at the bed where her husband lay, she saw instead the body of a raven lying on the bed and sucking the warmth from the room.

Casting a warming charm and feeling the tendrils of panic she associated with the presence of Dementors, Susan stepped back. "Should we do something?"

"We stay away from him for now. I don't want to do anything until the Mediwitch gets back. Besides, Harry might have figured out a way to fight whatever's in his nightmares."

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Harry dodged again trying to stay one step ahead of his parents flailing arms. Knowing this was a battle in his mind helped him focus.

"So you're a coward as well," James Potter's voice hissed. "Somehow you ended up in our house."

"James, perhaps you should show our spawn what real speed is like."

Harry shifted nervously as his father's shape blurred and elongated becoming an enormous stag. Prongs barreled into him, knocking Harry to the ground. The antlers stabbed at him, drawing blood.

"Aw my poor baby, are you trying to tell yourself that it's all in your mind. It sure feels real, doesn't it? Hold him there darling. I'd like to join in the fun."

Lily Potter's foot slammed repeatedly into his side. After the third blow, he felt a ribs cracking. "Oh, didn't you want a mother's loving touch? I can see Petunia was too soft on you. I'd thought they would have toughened you up, but once again, I was wrong!"

Grimacing in pain, Harry dodged the next assault from his father and rolled out from underneath. His father could transform, so why couldn't he? "Here's something you should be proud of Dad!" Bleeding from his wounds and clutching his right side, Harry transformed into his Raven form. Flying was still difficult for him, but once he was airborne, he was out of their reach.

Still, he felt weak. Being unable to get any decent sleep had taken a toll out of him. He could feel the warmth and energy surrounding him. He didn't want to use it, but there wasn't much choice. If his Animagus form worked in his mind, would the Dementor aura work on these things masquerading as his parents?

The woman and the stag circled below him – one shouting insults and the other howling in animal rage. There was a part of Harry that hoped that if these truly were his parents, they would find a way to break this hold Riddle had over them and free themselves, but the rest of him remembered Peter's silver hand. Riddle wouldn't create a weapon that could be used against him. He made his decision and focused, drawing the warmth and energy to him. It slaked a ravenous thirst from within him – a hunger he didn't know existed.

He felt the creatures below him; they were drawing on his energy. That was wrong and he was certain he could right it. He sensed the tendrils of power leaching away at him. Taking one in his beak, he pulled at it causing the woman below him to scream in shock and anger.

The silvery thread of energy was too rigid and strong for him to break, but it was the brighter of the two. Harry feared its strength. Like the weeds Petunia would let grow all spring until he returned, it was impossible to remove, but he could tell it was causing her pain. He dug his clawed feet into it and pecked at it with his beak.

Her gasping voice called out to him, "Harry, you mustn't do that! You're hurting us. Haven't we already suffered enough because of you?" He cawed angrily in reply to her.

The weed was too thick. He could damage it, but it was too strong. Harry released it and saw the damaged tendril already starting to strengthen and heal itself. Instead, he turned his attention to the link to his father. The stag roared in rage as the raven's claws sank into the tendril. This one was more supple and squirmed in Harry's grasp. He began rapidly working his beak against it and slashing it repeatedly with one of his claws. Tiny bits floated away from the connection as Harry drew more warmth and energy to him, buttressing his failing energy. The link was trying to heal the damage, but he bored into it like a bird seeking an elusive insect.

"Stop it Harry! You're hurting him! Without your strength, he'll wither and die. We gave our lives for you and this is how you repay us! I knew you were a mistake. You should have never been born."

He was better than halfway through. The insults only served to make him work harder. The stag fell to the ground and resumed his human form. "Harry, if you break the connection, I'll be gone for good. I don't want to die again. You can save us. You can keep me alive. Don't you want to rescue us from Voldemort?"

For some reason Harry could only picture the face of Snape mocking his father's pleas to spare his life. It was barely holding on now and Lily was now supporting her husband's weight as he stretched his arm towards Harry.

"You can't, Harry! Damn you to hell! If you do this now you'll never ..." James Potter never finished these words as the tendril snapped and he faded from view leaving only Lily clutching at the empty space where James had been.

Harry hoped that wherever the real James Potter was, he was grateful that Harry had ended that mockery. Without the drain from the creature that had been his father, he attacked the link with his mother with renewed vigor. It still held.

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily, Harry. Our connection is too strong. Enjoy your little victory. Before I was only commanded to torture you, but after what you’ve done to poor James, I want to hurt you. I’ll make you suffer.”

Harry landed and changed back into his human form, but his mother had already disappeared. He sank to the ground in exhaustion and let sleep claim him.

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Lord Voldemort felt the pull against him. It was only one of them, not both. He needed to investigate.

He Apparated to the makeshift Headquarters. He hoped Peter would soon have a suitable replacement soon. The warehouse was a bustle of activity, with dozens of animated bodies pushed behind hastily erected chain link fences. Immediately, he felt the drain increase.

‘*That would be Lily,*’ he thought to himself. He had the raw power to spare, but it was still an annoyance to him.

The creatures were kept in a locked closet. If only he could find the proper manner to inform young Harry of this. From what little he had learned of Potter’s upbringing, the irony might actually infuriate him even more.

He motioned to the guard, who was responsible for this room and the room where the vegetable known as Frank Longbottom was being kept, to leave. He opened the door.

The red headed perversion of humanity stared at him. “You are the Creator?”

“Yes. Tell me what has happened.”

“The little raven broke the tie to my James. James is very weak; something is wrong. He hurt my James. I will stalk the boy now.”

“No! You will stalk the boy when I command it. Can he break the link to you?”

“He tried, but tie is too strong. Please, Creator, let me stalk him now. I want to hurt him – to rip his flesh with my claws.”

“No. You will continue to go to him and prey upon him, but it appears James can no longer ...”

Lord Voldemort considered his options as the female begged for him save her mate. Again, the irony of Lily Potter begging for something was not lost on him. Perhaps James could still physically attack Harry, but the energy to provide the elder Potter with a faux-life must now come from Voldemort. He might need to consult with the Jamaican Witch.

The answer became apparent as the misshapen creature on the bed began thrashing and soundlessly screaming. The female leapt to his side as the body stilled and cradled his head. Voldemort felt the pull on his energy weaken and knew that one of the revenants was gone. The female howled in rage and vented her frustrations on the empty wooden crates. Free of the magic sustaining it, the husk began to rapidly decompose.

“Do not worry. We will avenge your mate. When the time is right, I will let you stalk the betrayer.”

The distorted creature ran a clawed hand across the skull of her twice dead husband, “Do you hear that, James? The Creator will let me avenge you!”

Voldemort wished that the creature had retained more of an intellect. From what he knew, the thing before him once possessed a formidable mind, enough to waylay him on his path to domination. Now, only in Potter’s dreams can it use his mind against him and sound like something more than a troll.

“Good, I will send for you soon. Until then, continue to punish him for destroying your mate. You called him the Raven. Tell me why.”

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Albus Dumbledore felt his age as he watched the bodies being floated into the infirmary. Professor Vector and two Aurors were

already investigating the Slytherin Dormitories. The other Aurors were examining the Greenhouses.

He was faced with a problem. Most of the parents of these children were openly active as Death Eaters. Perhaps, he should turn the bodies over to St. Mungo's and let them deal with the headaches involved with returning the bodies to the families. Unlike with Mr. Crabbe or Mr. Travers, where Minister Scrimgeour had moved too slowly, this time the Minister would no doubt attempt to leverage the bodies against the families. The Headmaster had little fear that the Ministry would close the school. Fudge would, but Scrimgeour was more about symbols of resistance. Unfortunately, Dumbledore knew that there would be more Aurors in this school shortly.

Part of the solution to his problem was heading towards him.

"You sent for me, Headmaster." The Head Girl approached him.

"Indeed I did, Miss Carruthers. First I must ask you to prepare yourself for some terrible news. This morning seven of your housemates were exposed to the screams of a fully grown Mandrake. I am truly sorry. We are investigating how this tragedy occurred."

Dumbledore had found that delivering bad news was never easy. Some of the previous Headmasters had pawned off this duty on their Deputies or left it to the individual Heads of House. The young woman in front of was clearly stunned, but quickly recovered her composure.

"Who was it?"

"All seven of the fourth years, I am afraid. We do not have the details yet, but when we have the facts, I will brief the staff first and then the Heads and Prefects. Our resident Aurors have already informed their superiors and I will be contacting both the Minister and the Board of Governors shortly."

"How can I help?"

"I would like you to send an owl to your father and make him aware of the situation. Since many of the parents of these children are known

Death Eaters, it is unlikely they will be directly reachable by owl post. Tell him that I will resist any efforts by the Minister to use the bodies as bargaining chips against their parents and that those who come to the castle to claim them will need to be free of the Dark Mark. However, I've heard rumors of widespread grave robberies in recent weeks. Inform your father that I will be most displeased if these children's bodies were to be defiled in such a manner. I would hold him personally responsible in that regard."

The Head Girl nodded, "I will tell him."

He dismissed her and watched her head towards the Owlery. Turning he saw Minerva approaching him. "The Aurors just informed me that Director Dawson will be here with a full team shortly. They're asking for you to meet them at the Greenhouse."

"I will be there as soon as I communicate today's tragic events to both the Minister and the Board of Governors."

"I still do not understand why you chose Miss Carruthers over the other candidates for Head Girl. Perhaps it is time to strip her of that title?"

"I loathe using a child as a go-between, but by placing her in this position, I have inundated her with responsibility. Were I to strip her of that title, it would allow her far more opportunities to gather information for her father. I allow her enough access to information that she does not pry for more. Have I ever told you about one of the benefits of being Headmaster?"

His deputy looked at him with a raised eyebrow, "What are you talking about, Albus?"

"There are charms on the badges for the Head Girl and Boy. I can locate them anywhere in the castle at any time. I can track their movements, should the need arise. Now, please greet the Aurors on my behalf and tell them I will be with them as soon as circumstances allow."

Dumbledore cast a look in the infirmary at the bodies covered with sheets. He had failed those children. Since dueling on school

grounds had been outlawed in 1585, there hadn't been this much death. There was nothing more he could do for these poor souls. Seeing Harry asleep in his avian form piqued his interest. Perhaps the Animagus in him would be less susceptible to whatever influence Tom attempted to exert. He would investigate later. For now, he must speak to the Minister and the Board of Governors.

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Two days later, Harry was finally getting released from the infirmary. He was still weak, but now only his Mother infested his dreams and she was easy enough to avoid in his bird form. Unfortunately, Harry's sleep still wasn't that productive. She continued to accuse him of killing his father.

He didn't like the world he returned to. More students were dead and the story about one of them killing the rest just didn't sit well with him. Eight Slytherins and one Ravenclaw had died in less than a month. To say that things were on edge was an understatement.

Of course, this coincided with his stay in the infirmary, so naturally there were rumors that all seven of them had attacked Harry and he had been injured killing them. He didn't know what he thought of that particular rumor, but Susan already had Parvati working the gossip network to dispel that one. Could he actually take seven fourth years at once? Without whatever Riddle was doing to him – definitely. Right now, Harry settled for 'maybe'.

The Slytherins were now being escorted to and from classes by various teachers and the Aurors. Dumbledore had at least turned the situation to his advantage and used it as a reason to provide additional supervision. There was even talk that Professor Vector would be moving in to the now vacant dorm to provide the students with the added feeling of security. Oddly, that move was meeting some resistance from the Board of Governors, who seemed to frown on the idea of students and teachers occupying the same general living area.

All of the students were a bit nervous. Dumbledore had asked them to not travel alone in hallways with only the Prefects and the Heads immune to this request. Narcissa entered the room and



acknowledged him and sat down next the Charlie's bed. Harry walked over and sat next to her.

"How are you feeling today, Harry?"

"Still run down. How about you? How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?" she replied slightly defensively.

"Susan hasn't spoken to you yet?"

Narcissa shook her head and looked at Harry suspiciously. "What is this about?"

He cast a privacy charm surrounding them and was disgusted at how much effort it required. "The Black Family tapestry – we have it hidden in our quarters. Look I don't know any other way to say this, so here goes. It says that you're having Charlie's baby . . . I guess you didn't know."

Narcissa stared at him blinking rapidly and not saying a word for a minute. Finally, she started, "I thought it was just the stress of all this getting to me. It's been so terrible lately . . . Are you certain? Silly question, of course you are, the tapestry never lies! Oh my! This is all very – unexpected. I need to sit for a . . . Oh wait, I'm already sitting."

Harry managed a small smile at her reaction. Apparently, Narcissa could be surprised and forfeit her composure. "It said you're having a boy."

"A son! Oh dear, Draco will think I'm trying to replace him, and I don't even want to imagine the horrible things Molly Weasley will say about me."

A weak, raspy voice interrupted from the bed next to them, "You'd better let me handle Mum. She'll go spare for certain, but it can't be much worse than when I told her I was giving up Quidditch for to work with Dragons."

"Charlie! You're awake." Harry heard Narcissa say as she shed the last of her rigid mannerisms and literally squealed throwing her arms

around him. That made Harry smile. It was nice to see something good and right in the world for a change.

“Good to see you again, Charlie. I’ll go get the Nurse. On second thought, why don’t I give you a minute or two and then go get her.”

“Thanks Harry.” Charlie answered as he sipped at the water Narcissa was holding to his lips. He smiled at the woman in front of him. “Hey, you just called me Charlie . . .”

“Nonsense, Charles. You’ve been out for several days and I’m certain you must be imagining things.”

“No, I’m pretty sure I heard you call me Charlie.”

“Oh shut up and kiss me.”

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“You need to pay more attention to your stirring, Miss Carruthers. Such carelessness is dangerous. Despite recent events, you must keep your focus in the Potions Lab. Do you understand me?”

The rest of the NEWT Potions class beat a hasty retreat as the Professor berated the Head Girl. Her position allowed her and the Slytherin Prefects to travel without an escort.

“I’m sorry sir. It won’t happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t.” He leaned close enough so that even if someone were trying to hear them they would not. “Tell your father that I have agreed to a certain generous offer and would like to make arrangements as soon as possible.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Now go.”

Coedus knew the noose was tightening. He would need contingency plans in the event he needed to escape. The school was positively thick with Aurors after the deaths of the seven students. Despite

Neville's denials, Coedus saw the boy's signature all over it. The killing was going to the boy's head and Coedus doubted the deaths would stop here. He would need to tread carefully from here on out. Should his nephew's house of cards collapse, the authorities will blame the vampire. From what he had read, they could use Frank Longbottom's body for the ritual, but Neville was a much finer choice. Why settle for the body of a forty-ish man who hadn't been active in fifteen years when he could have the body of a sixteen year old just coming into adulthood?

Fortunately, Coedus was a long-lived creature and that life had brought with it patience. He resisted the urge to lash out at the little liar and accepted the whiny platitudes. Originally, he had hoped to give the boy the right direction for his anger and live vicariously through him.

Now, he regretted starting the boy down his path of revenge as it might interfere with his own opportunities to give the world the payback it so richly deserves. He would need to prepare a scapegoat to serve up to the authorities when Neville's luck ran out. He needed someone who could be believably seen as a killer and had a grudge against Slytherins in general. He needed someone like – Draco Malfoy, the little fallen angel of Salazar's house. The little ponce would be perfect for the role.

It would take a week for the necessary potions to be prepared. Combined with his Vampiric gift of hypnotism, the Malfoy boy could be turned into a thrall, but it would take time. Coedus cringed at the irony; for once, time was not on his side. Time was rarely a concern for the dead, but now it was working against him.

The second year students began to file into the room for the afternoon session. Four more hours to be wasted teaching the useless blood bags. No! When the first one melts their cauldron, he'll dismiss the class for the day. Then he can get started on a suitable subjugation elixir.

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Things were finally looking up for Ginny Weasley. The cloud that had hung over her life since the beginning of the school year had lifted.

Her brother Charlie was well on the road to recovery. Even Fred looked upbeat for a change.

A week had passed since Neville had kissed her. They'd altered their morning schedule to include periods of 'rest' between their laps. Surprisingly, Neville was much better than Michael Corner.

She had overslept this morning finishing her assignments so she'd have the whole day free. Looking out her window from Gryffindor Tower, she didn't see him running laps. So, she threw robes on to get breakfast instead.

Entering the Great Hall, she didn't see him either only the few other early risers which included Harry and Susan. It was still odd to think of them as the Potters. Ginny still felt mixed about the two of them. Had she been less of an idiot, that could have easily been her sitting there, but Harry's recent actions made her wonder if that would have made her happy? Truth be told, Susan hadn't look terribly happy this month - even less so with Harry's recent stint in the infirmary. Both of them looked haggard and worn.

Since Neville wasn't here, or outside exercising, and Seamus had said that he wasn't in the dorms, that meant he was either with his undead relative or with Pansy. Ginny found herself grimacing in distaste at the thought of Neville and Pansy in a cupboard.

She made a snap decision and headed towards the seated trio. "Good morning, everyone. Tonks, would you mind if I looked at the map? I was hoping to find Neville."

The Auror quickly scanned the map and looked up at her shrugging. "Well, he's in the broom closet nearest to the Prefect's Bath with Pansy Parkinson, so you might not want to interrupt him."

"I see," she said scowling at Harry. Here he was enjoying a breakfast while Neville did his dirty work. She was losing more respect for him by the second. Spinning on her heels, she left the three of them staring at each other in confusion.

Her mood, which had been cheerful, was now angry as her footsteps punished the steps below her. Ginny's mood swings were legendary. She wasn't sure who she was really angry at.

One who didn't know how much she had been exercising lately would confuse the redness of her face with being winded after her rapid ascent. They would be wrong. She didn't care about bloody Harry Potter's secret spy network. She wanted some time with her new boyfriend!

It took three times to defeat the locking charm on the closet. Either Neville was getting quite good or he made Pansy do it. She opened the door and was shocked at the site in front of her.

Neville was backed up against the wall with a shirtless, braless Pansy on her knees in front of him bobbing up and down as if her very life depended on it. Open mouthed, Ginny tried to process the scene in front of her. As if this wasn't traumatic enough, Pansy had a red coloring charm applied to her hair! It was probably only five seconds with the only sound being the wet slurping of Pansy's mouth, but it felt like an eternity before they noticed her.

"Ginny! Shit! It's not what you think!"

"You bastard! I believed you!" Had she been capable of more coherent thought, she might have asked exactly what she was supposed to think? Instead, she hurled her bat bogey hex at him.

"Ow! Shit, Pansy! Get off me, you stupid bitch!" Unconcerned, the Slytherin girl had continued her rhythmic movements until she was commanded otherwise.

"We're through, Longbottom, and I'm going to the Headmaster right now. Fuck you and Harry Potter!" With tears of hurt and betrayal in her eyes, she spun and slammed the door.

Neville smacked away at the tiny magical creatures clawing at him as he grasped his wand and started to work the counter. "No, Ginny wait! Pansy, don't just sit there! Stop her!"

Still without a top on Pansy rushed out the cupboard and saw the Weasley girl already on the staircase. Neville wanted the little bint stopped; Pansy would stop her all right. "*Exosossis Opprimo! Percuito!*"

The bonecrusher caught Weasley in the hip with a powerful snap, sending her plunging down the stairs. The piercing curse lanced through the witches' lower back, sending a spray of blood and pieces of flesh misting into the air. The girl's shriek of pain became a strangled gasp that ended when her head slammed into the cold unforgiving stone. The Gryffindor landed roughly three steps above the landing and slid bonelessly the remaining distance - settling in a tiny, barely moving heap of bleeding flesh. Ten seconds later, Neville burst out of the closet still only half dressed. "Bitch! What have you done?"

She smiled vindictively at him. "You said to stop her. Does she look like she's moving, *Master?*"

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## Chapter 36 – Utter Chaos

Sunday September 22nd, 1996

Neville Longbottom looked down the stairwell in horror. It wasn't supposed to be like this! Things were going so well; this shouldn't be happening! Several steps below them Ginny Weasley lay in a pool of her own blood. The fact that she wasn't screaming in agony told Neville that it was too late. Even still, he ran down to the landing and silently prayed for a miracle, but there was none to be had. Those beautiful eyes, previously so full of emotion, stared back, lifeless, filled with hateful accusations.

Turning towards the bare-chested Pansy Parkinson, his face contorted in rage, "Why did you do this?"

"I was just following orders, *Master*. You told me to stop her. Oh what's the matter *Master*? It looks like this will be pretty hard to cover up won't it? Maybe you're not as smart as you thought you were!" Pansy sneered at him; an odd sight, considering that her hair was still colored in Ginny's brilliant hue.

He knew he didn't have much time. Pansy had practically screamed her spells. People would be here any second. He had to think of a way out of this!

The sickeningly sweet voice of his thrall interrupted his desperate thoughts, "Face it *Master*, you're finished. You may have been screwing me, but I'm pretty sure I just fucked you good!"

"You bitch! I'll kill you! Throw your wand on the ground! Go down there!" He said gesturing to the landing where Ginny lay. Pansy mechanically complied with while desperately starting to protest.

"No Neville, don't make me do this – please!"

"You've left me no choice. Climb up onto the banister! On your way down you can think about who's really going to get screwed. Goodbye Pansy. Now jump forward!"

As the Slytherin plunged to her death, screaming all the way, Neville started working on his cover story. The two girls were fighting over him. Yes, that was it! Pansy went too far and murdered Ginny. Oddly, it was actually the truth. Next, when he rejected Pansy, the distraught girl jumped to her death. Such a horrible tragedy . . .

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“Am I the only one who had no idea what Ginny was talking about back there?” Susan asked.

Harry shook his head at his wife and said, “No, I’m pretty confused as well, but the map says she’s heading straight towards Neville and Pansy. We better make sure nothing bad happens. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

The two of them, accompanied by Tonks, moved quickly down the hallway towards the staircases. They were almost there when they heard a piercing scream. Looking up, they saw a girl with red hair falling. Harry and Tonks instantly drew their wands. He cast a cushioning charm on the stone floor while the Auror attempted the *Arresto Momentum* spell. She wasn’t slowing down fast enough! He couldn’t let Ginny die and he cast the only spell he could think of.

“*Levicorpus!*” The spell he had learned from the portrait of his godfather yanked on the falling witch’s legs. A horrible snapping sound occurred as both her legs broke and then her head slammed into the cushioned stone. Thanks to the charm, it was more forgiving than stone should be, but in the end, it was still stone.

The trio rushed over and heard a voice yelling from up above. “Help! Help! Someone’s badly injured up here. Get help!”

“Merlin!” Susan exclaimed. “That’s not Ginny. It’s Pansy!”

“Susan, Harry stay here! I’ll go help out above.”

“I’m coming too, Tonks!”



“No. You stay with your *wife*. Tend to the Parkinson girl.” Tonks sprinted up the stairs and used a leaping spell to reach a level where the ever moving staircases were not impeding her progress.

Harry looked at Pansy and saw that the witch’s legs were badly broken. He used his wand to cast the basic medical diagnostic charms while Susan sent some other students to fetch the Nurse.

He worked through the myriad colors glowing on Pansy’s body. Orange meant broken bones. Purple was contusions. Black indicated internal bleeding. She was pretty busted up, but still alive. Susan returned to his side and conjured a blanket to cover the Slytherin girl’s half naked body, but stopped short of putting it on top of her. Harry glanced out of the corner of his eye to see what was wrong with her.

“Harry, look at the necklace she’s wearing!”

His eyes were drawn towards the necklace nestled in the girl’s cleavage. Husband and wife shared a look of befuddlement before Harry told Susan to summon their elf.

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After telling Tonks that Ginny and Pansy had been fighting over him, Neville claimed he was going to be sick and fled. Quickly, he made his way to another stairwell and swiftly descended. He needed to speak with his Uncle.

He used the signal they agreed on – two quick knocks, a delay and three additional knocks on the door to announce his presence.

The door opened, it was one of the few magical spells the Vampire could do wandlessly.

“I was resting, Neville. What is so important that you must disturb me?”

“There have been two more deaths.”

“Really? Get in here and close the door! Move, fool!”

Neville found himself dragged into the room and thrown bodily into a chair. The Vampire snarled at him, "Tell me everything!"

When Neville finished speaking, he could see his Uncle quivering with barely controlled rage. "You fool! I warned you about proceeding too quickly! Stay here! I will go to the Infirmary and try to recover the necklace from the dead girl. You will not leave this office until I return, unless a teacher or Auror comes for you. I think I can still salvage this, but we need to retrieve the necklace before someone notices it."

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Coedus raced up the hallway – startling the few students milling around with the speed with which he moved. His mind was moving even faster. He might have to take the blame and flee to preserve the boy's innocence. Or he might have to 'kidnap' his nephew and flee with him. Thinking ahead, he'd have to clean out his personal laboratory, otherwise when they search his personal lab, they would find the subjugation potions he was preparing for the Malfoy brat. After transferring his essence to the brat, as Lord Voldemort had promised, the 'new' Neville Longbottom could resurface, claiming to have escaped and have been controlled by the 'nasty, dark' creature.

Entering the Hospital wing, he found chaos. Two Aurors and the Nurse circled around the bedside, working. Another small group stood around a bed occupied by a body covered in a sheet.

His sharp eyes and piercing gaze spotted Harry Potter, holding a necklace in his hands. A house elf stood next to him with an empty jewelry box. He locked eyes with Potter and instantly knew that his Nephew's actions were beyond repair. It was time to retreat.

"Stop him! *Reducto!*"

The spell was fast and the boy's aim was flawless. Coedus was only marginally faster and lost a divot of flesh from his forearm. Fortunately, the impetus of the spell threw him back towards the hallway and towards freedom.

He dodged the successive spells that slammed into the wall behind him as he sprinted down the hallway. Three loud gongs sounded, for

the second time, to inform the school of an emergency. The remaining Aurors would already be sealing the entrances of the castle. He changed into his bat form and flew. It would be painful, but not immediately lethal to fly during daylight. He could only do it for a short distance, enough to get him into the forest. From there he would find a dark place to hide until nightfall and determine a way to salvage this situation. The injured bat wobbled unsteadily, shooting past the closing doors and into the searing pain of the early morning sun.

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At the same time, the Minister of Magic stood in his conference room surrounded by his advisers. This was to be a massive strike at the heart of the enemy. The five strike teams of 20 witches and wizards had been carefully screened and assembled. The intelligence was reliable. The fact that the Death Eater headquarters would soon be conquered was very good news indeed.

In the center of the table was a Muggle contraption typically used for communicating with the Prime Minister of Great Britain. Today, Rufus Scrimgeour was waiting for the battlefield reports from Ada Dawson, his commander in the field.

“Sir, if you’d like to wait in your office I can come and get you as soon as she gets on the line?” the specter once known as Percy Weasley offered.

“No, I’d rather wait here. The only thing waiting for me on my desk is a stack of worthless paperwork. If the attack is successful, that can most certainly wait for another day.”

Rufus did not even want to entertain the idea that the attack might not be successful.

They waited in silence for the old telephone to ring. Twenty long minutes passed before it rang. He scooped the receiver off the hook, “Scrimgeour here. Report.”

“Sir, our detection equipment is registering increased activity in the general area for the last hour. Our Arithmancers estimate that the entire ward structure will collapse within the next fifteen minutes.”

“Very good Director, the moment the wards fall, you have my authorization to launch the attack.”

Rufus heard his old friend acknowledge his orders. Part of him felt that he should still be out there – leading the charge, but this wasn’t like the last time. This was not some tiny safe house, isolated and alone. This was their main headquarters and it was likely to be heavily defended. Many people were going to die today because of his orders. He only hoped that it would be worth it.

The Minister did not have to wait very long for the wards to fall. He could feel his heart beating slightly faster as the anticipation built. Running his hand through his hair, which had far more gray than it had a mere two months before, Rufus nervously waited for any word.

He gulped hard when the telephone suddenly went dead. There was a momentary sensation of panic before he realized that it had gone dead on *his* end and the thunderous sounds of explosions could be heard throughout the building.

One of his bodyguards looked out the window, “Minister! We’re under attack! It looks like dozens of them and they’ve brought Giants!”

There were only a handful of personnel in the Ministry on a Sunday morning. Scrimgeour immediately knew that he had been out-maneuvered.

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Minutes ticked away while Neville fidgeted in his Uncle’s spartan quarters. He hated not knowing. The castle was in lock-down. He doubted he could escape if he wanted to.

Finally, he could stand it no more. “Bessie!”

The house elf responded to his summons. “Go to the infirmary and listen to the conversations. Find out what they are saying and report back to me in five minutes!”

The sad little creature disappeared and Neville returned to his waiting.

While he waited, he tried to figure out where it had gone wrong. Pansy! That's where he went wrong. He should have just killed the bint straight away and left it at that. All of the Slytherins were no damn good! Poor Ginny, she was easily worth ten of them, if only she hadn't been so jealous and hot headed! Really, when you looked at it objectively, it was her fault. She shouldn't have acted so rashly.

The elf reappeared. "You is in trouble! The Vampire runned away and they is searching for him nowly. Wizards coming to get you nowly too."

"No!" he exclaimed, knocking priceless books from the shelf. He wasn't done yet! He hadn't avenged his family, Luna and now Ginny. He hadn't made those damn Slytherins pay! Now they were coming to stop him. He wouldn't get to kill any more of the Slytherins who so desperately needed to die! What could he do? They would be covering the exits. He would be dragged out and his wand snapped, because they didn't understand. They didn't have the courage to do what must be done.

Suddenly, his path was clear. He wondered why he hadn't seen it before. He was right next to the Slytherin Dorms and they were all in there, just waiting for him to judge them.

"Bessie, bring me a potted Mandrake and a set of earmuffs!"

"No, Bessie can't! They has taked away all the Mandrakes from the greenhouses and Hogwarts' elves are forbidden to leave the grounds." Neville cursed himself for a fool. Why hadn't he just ordered Pansy to take one into the dorms that morning and wipe out the entire house! He'd have to do this the old fashioned way. Pansy had already told him the password. He'd go into the snake's hole and kill them all. Then everyone would realize that he was the hero.

The might even give him an Order of Merlin...

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Lord Voldemort hurled spells with reckless abandon. The rebuilt fountain in the atrium was destroyed for a second time. As anticipated, resistance was both light and pathetic. He moved swiftly up the stairs

heading for the Minister's office as his minions tossed open doors and used incendiary curses on anything burnable.

A plan can be beautiful in its simplicity – sack the Ministry, kill the Minister, and throw the government into chaos.

Slashing his wand he sent a cutting curse through a nearby door and heard a scream from behind the broken woodwork. It made him crack a thin smile.

He leaned over the banister and called down to Peter, who was directing the forces in the atrium. "Peter, don't forget to stop by Arthur Weasley's office."

Two of his Death Eaters were already trying to breach the Minister's warded door. It was a pity that Lucius was dead. He claimed to have been familiar with the previous Minister's emergency escape plans, though Scrimgeour would most certainly have tailored any plans to his needs.

The door exploded, sending shrapnel and debris everywhere. One of his Death Eaters was caught unaware and badly injured by the explosion. Voldemort raised a vanishing shield that disintegrated the wood as it approached him. He stepped through the smoking wreckage into the outer office and batted away a bonecrusher and a cutting curse.

He snarled and sent a spray of acid into the face of a bodyguard, as the Minister hurled a pair of errant curses at him in rapid succession, before diving into his office and slamming the door.

"Would you like me to knock before I enter? I'm afraid I don't have an appointment. There's no escape for you Minister! Like a captain with his ship, it is fitting that you are going to die at your desk. Know that I will crucify your carcass and mount it over the main entrance for all to see."

He sensed the wards on the inner door and cracked a gleeful smile – it was a waste of power, but it had a sense of style to it. Instead of fighting the heavily warded rune-covered portal, Voldemort vanished an adjacent section of the wall and stepped through.

The Minister's heavy oak desk was banished at him only to be vaporized. He had hoped for more from the former head of the Aurors – no wonder Amelia Bones had always outclassed him. The Dark Lord prepared to finish him when a hazy whiteness obscured his vision.

“Die you bastard!” The ghost of Percy Weasley screamed swinging his fists ineffectively through Voldemort's body. The distraction was well conceived; a powerful cutting curse slammed into his Unicorn hide vest. The Dark Lord hissed in pain as he felt the material give way and the curse drew blood underneath.

A killing curse passed through the ghost and struck Rufus Scrimgeour, sending the Minister toppling backwards. Lord Voldemort had wanted taunt him a bit more, but the injury was grave enough that he simply needed to finish him off.

Thrusting his wand inside his cloak and uttering the words to close the wound, he mocked the ghost in front of him, “Again, you come up short Percy. I hadn't expected to see you again.”

“Your days are numbered Riddle.”

Voldemort laughed at the feeble attempt to rile him. “I was never certain if the Muggles decided whether Infinity is a number. Most Arithmancers seem to be divided on the subject. Since you obviously have the time, why don't you look into it and get back to me.”

Even with all the hidden knowledge he possessed, there was no permanent solution for eliminating a ghost, so he settled for the temporary one, “*Phasmatidis Conturbo!* I must apologize Percy, but time is short, and I must be going. So, do spend the next several hours trying to reincorporate yourself. We can continue this at a later date.”

Amidst the screams from portraits of Ministers long since dead, Lord Voldemort conjured a column of living fire and commanded it to lay waste to the room. He summoned the corpse of the Minister and began making his way out of the building. Idly he wondered, with the Wizarding World being largely wary of Christianity, how many would actually appreciate the Christ motif that he intended to create.

Staring down into the atrium and listening to the explosions, he flared his nostril slits and savored the sweet smell of chaos. For a moment, he almost considered manning the building and forcing the Ministry to reclaim their building by force, but it would be a waste of resources. To the wild applause of his lackeys, he transfigured the ruins of the atrium centerpiece into a cross, he vanished the Minister's clothing and mounted the corpse with a careful, artistic eye.

"Come, we are leaving! Our task here is complete. We should leave. They continue to underestimate our fighting skills. Let us see who they appoint as my next opponent!"

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Daphne Greengrass looked at her housemates milling around the common room in disgust. "Rourke! Can you go see if the Ferret Prince is in his room? Missy's gone to see what in blazes this is all about, Parkinslut is probably bent over somewhere, and Ashley and Carl are still off school grounds for the funerals. Malfoy's a Prefect too. It's about damn time he remembers that and starts pulling his weight! Screw it! I'll go get him."

*'When exactly had the Prefects turned into such wastes of human flesh? Oh wait, I know the answer, shortly after they stepped off the Hogwarts Express.'* Daphne shot Millicent and Tracey exasperated look as she walked past and they smiled back at her innocently. They knew about her obsessive nature; they could be giving her a hand too! Instead, her two best friends chose to sit back and watch the confusion. She detested chaos and disorganization.

To this day, she could still see the shocked looks on Millie and TD's faces when she showed up without the Prefect Patch on her robes at the start of fifth year. It seemed Snape decided that giving his precious Draco the run of the castle with his promised wench was more important than things like grades, skill, talent, looks ... the list went on, but she wasn't the least bit bitter. She was actually one of the few Slytherins that didn't miss the greasy bastard one bit!

Working her way through 'The Maze' with practiced ease, she found herself in the sixth-year boy's dormitories – a veritable pig sty which challenged the powers of even the house elves. There was sleeping



dickhead himself, wallowing in his filth. She stepped inside the silencing charm surrounding his engorged bed.

“Malfoy! Get up!” She stared at the shifting black silk sheets – black silk? Just when she had thought her opinion of him couldn’t sink any lower!

Draco blinked at her trying to wipe the sleep out of her eyes, “Fly off Greengrass! What the fuck did I do to deserve you this morning?”

Daphne crinkled her nose in disdain. Malfoy was always so delightfully vulgar, but she could play that game as well. “Keep dreaming, limp-dick, that’s the only way you’re getting close to this witch. In the meantime, get up and do your damn job. The castle’s gone into lockdown and Rourke’s the only Prefect around and if there is one person even less capable in this house than you, it’s Rourke the dork.”

“What?”

Daphne smacked her head so hard it actually hurt. Shaking her blonde curls, she quelled the urge to transfigure his clothes into polka dotted pajamas and float his worthless arse out into the common room. With a deep sigh she held both of her palms outwards, “I won’t even bother repeating myself, just go out there and act like you actually earned something instead of having it given to you, for once in your misbegotten life.”

She turned and stormed out of the room wondering, not for the first time what Salazar would think of his house now? If there was any justice in the world, Draco would have choked on that silver spoon a long time ago. It was depressing. As she walked back, she heard shouts and screams. That was just great. The wands had come out already – just further proof that Rourke couldn’t organize his own bowel movements much less a room full of students. Drawing her hickory and Abraxan wing feather wand, she turned the corner, wondering what mayhem awaited her.

A trio of students ploughed through her, knocking her to the ground in a complete panic! On her hands and knees, she managed to grasp

her wand as another student stepped on her bloody hand and tripped and fell into the wall!

“Bloody fucking Rourke! What is your problem?” Daphne looked at the seventh year Prefect in the dim light of the passageway, his head lolled to the side and she saw his hand holding his stomach. Despite the absence of good lighting, the dark liquid staining his shirt was unmistakable. The sound of a thunderclap shook the wall she was crouched next to, releasing a cloud of dust that made her cough as she closed Rourke’s wound. He might have lost too much blood already, but Daphne didn’t care. That thunderclap was Tracey’s signature move and she wouldn’t dare do it indoors unless something was dreadfully wrong. She scrambled forward and tried to stay low as she peered out into the common room.

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The ductwork had been the idea of a previous Minister who didn’t like clutter. With all the flying memos that constantly circled the building, one of his predecessors disliked the unending stream of paperwork entering the office and had this installed to direct all the traffic through these ducts. Memos to the Minister’s office would traverse this path instead of molesting people trying to approach the office.

It was this predecessor’s sense of decorum that Rufus Scrimgeour had to thank for his escape from certain death. He was currently four inches tall and riding a six inch long, fully functional broom through this very same ducting. Of his two bodyguards, one had balked at facing a Dark Lord for a paycheck – a well-placed Imperius curse had been required before the man would drink the Polyjuice and take his place. It was getting harder to find bodyguards with the requisite willingness to lay down their life for his – and now he needed more.

Fudge had counted on someone to come save him and had a safe room available through a trapdoor under the desk. Rufus was a firm believer that if someone had gotten that far, no warded room was going to protect him. Instead, he had what he called the Alice in Wonderland plan – complete with a bottle labeled ‘Drink Me’ and a shrunken package of biscuits to reverse the process, appropriately labeled ‘Eat Me’.

Reaching a recently installed vertical section, he angled his broom upwards. Smoke was starting to invade the shaft as he reached the roof. The bend switched to a horizontal one and a thin flap of metal was all that separated him from freedom.

First he stopped and looked out the tiny holes that had been drilled into the end. There were still Death Eaters on the rooftop. Reaching into his cloak he removed his tiny wand and cast a glamour. Satisfied, he flew directly out of the pipe.

“Eh, what was that?” Rufus heard a voice call.

“Looked like a bat – nothing to worry about. Hey look! They’re giving us the signal to set off the Dark Mark. We’re done here.”

He would fly well clear of the building before returning to his regular size and then on to Auror Headquarters. His frustration at being fooled began to infuriate him. “This is not over, Voldemort! Not by a long shot!”

In his reduced state, his voice sounded like an angry squeak, which only served to anger him more.

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Neville had to admit it was a cute trick from Davis as the deafening shockwave sent him flying backwards, but having been manhandled by an angry Vampire had given him a deft proficiency with cushioning charms. Things were going well. There was precious little fight in the squirming snakelings. It was almost disappointing.

With a cloak over his head masking his face and disillusionment charms hiding his presence, he slipped through the door a few minutes earlier, leaving the Auror he had stunned back in the hallway. So this was the Slytherin common room. He didn’t waste any time and cast a detonation curse on the table several were gathered around. The explosion injured many and started the screams. It was a symphony to his spirit as he started tossing around banishers, Reductors, and cutting curses as fast as he could cast them. Where was their vaunted superiority now? They were screaming like a bunch of babies looking for their Death Eater mumsies. The chaos and

confusion worked to his advantage as most gave into their instincts to flee. The disillusionment charm faded and he blinked into existence.

He managed to fire off at least five spells before the first person came to their senses and started returning fire – with a stunner? Merlin above, what kind of ludicrous spell choice was that? He dodged it and returned a blasting curse that drove through the boy's shield, sending pieces of his body flying backwards. This caused yet more screams.

It was just as he expected. They were all talk. Most were running into the passageways leading to their rooms. Pansy had told him it was designed to be a maze. He looked forward to stalking them in their little snake holes. Neville had his very own Triwizard Tournament Task now. He'd be the champion this time!

Stepping over a body he sent a cutting curse that Tracey Davis dived under. It didn't matter to Neville as it struck the already injured Nott who had been cowering behind the Slytherin witch. It served him right. Neville didn't recognize her return curse, but dodged it so he could use another detonation curse on a row of chairs that he saw someone hiding behind.

That's when Davis responded with an area effect spell of her own. There was some impressive raw power behind the spell. That and the girl's attractive figure made Neville wish that he had used the necklace on Tracey instead.

Rebounding off the wall, he stumbled narrowly avoiding a disarming curse intent on separating him from his wand. There was murder in Davis' eyes. "I'm going to fucking kill you!"

Neville whipped his wand out and released a quick Reductor curse catching the girl and sending her flying across the room. *'Stupid bint! Don't talk about it, just do it!'*

An angry cry accompanied a piercing curse that gouged his leg. He staggered to his left and scanned the room filled with almost a dozen bodies for his opponent – a flash of blond hair by one of the passageways. *'It's Malfoy! No such luck, it's only Greengrass. Why can't they just all die already?'*

She followed with a severing charm. Finally, Neville felt like they were taking him seriously! All those jeers they had hurled at him over the years and the faces of his dead relatives killed by their parents fueled his anger and forced more magic into his spells. His Reductor blew a chunk of stonework just where her head had been a split-second before. Neville needed to finish her quickly so he could start hunting more of them.

He banished a burning couch towards her. She tried to banish it right back at him, but the force of his spell was too powerful for her and it smashed into her pinning her to the wall. Her head smacked into the wall and she slid bonelessly on top of the smoldering sofa.

He leapt passed her cackling, "You can't stop me little witch. Harry himself said I was worth ten of you and now, I'll kill you all!"

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"Damn! He's not here! Pull out the map and find out where he went." Harry looked at Tonks and the other Auror who had come with them. Harry had hoped that Neville would respond better to his presence and they could find out what Coedus' plans were more easily. They had spotted him on the map, waiting in the Vampire's quarters and hurried to collect him.

Tonks unfurled the original Marauder's Map and they scanned intently for the name. There was a rumbling noise that shook the items on the shelves. All three of them shared a worried glance.

"There! The Slytherin Dorms!" Tonks nearly shrieked. Harry stared at the map. Neville was in the Slytherin common room? Suddenly the dot labeled with the name Tracey Davis leapt from one end of the common room to another and began to fade from view. Harry blinked hard. She was dead.

"Come on, he's killing them. We have to stop him!" Harry sprinted for the door with the other two on his heels. The Vampire must have brainwashed him. It was the only logical choice. Harry began to wonder how strong Neville really was. The prophecy could have just as easily applied to him. There was an Auror on the ground stunned.

They enervated him as the other one gave the password to open the door.

The common room he had once visited in his second year looked like a war zone. There were far too many bodies for the few names that still registered on the map clutched in his hand. "This way!" he shouted, only to be stopped by Tonks' hand on his shoulder.

She addressed the pair of Aurors. "You two are going in. Use your copy of the map and stop him – alive, if possible. If he tries to leave the dungeon, Harry and I will cover the common room and try and save the ones still alive here. No arguments from you Potter! We'll stop him here if he tries to come back out." She looked at one of the portraits carefully looking out from her damaged frame. "You there, is help on the way?"

The portrait echo, with tears running down her face, nodded at Tonks, who was already moving towards the first name on her map. She pointed at the damaged couch and told Harry to check out the person there.

Harry reined in his response. Tonks was only doing what a bodyguard would do and his proclivity to head on into danger attitude wasn't always a good thing. He doused the embers and heard a soft moan as the water must have awakened the witch. Daphne Greengrass looked up blearily up at him.

With a thin line of blood dribbling from the corner of her mouth, she hissed at him, "My legs! Come to finish off the job, bastard!"

"No. We're here to help."

"Help Tracey first, she's badly hurt." Her words surprised Harry. It wasn't the plea of an ambitious, mercenary pureblood. It was a teenage girl desperately wanting to help her best friend. Bill's comments about teenagers fighting wars flashed back to haunt him. Using the same diagnostics he had recently used on Pansy, he could see that she had a skull fracture with a likely concussion, internal bleeding and a broken hip.

“I’m sorry, Daphne. It’s too late for her, but you I can help. You’re bleeding internally. I’m going to stick you to the wall so I can move the couch without you falling down. Here’s a blood replenisher.”

He hoped her crying was from her injuries. Unlike the loss of her friend, the injuries could be fixed.

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A shirtless Draco Malfoy moved carefully through the maze. Crabbe and Zabini had fled back into the dormitories saying that a bunch of wizards were slaughtering people out there. Draco wasn’t going to cower in his room, not when he knew the myriad twists and turns of ‘The Maze’ like the back of his hand. There were hiding places, false walls, and choke points scattered throughout. His pulse raced as he heard the sounds of spells being cast nearby.

He circled around pushing through a false wall and heard two older voices. “Fast little bugger isn’t he? Give it up you can’t shield against us forever. We’ll wear you out soon enough.”

Draco didn’t recognize the voices, so he immediately sent a pair of bludgeoners at them from behind, smiling as both smashed into the wall in a heap and finished them off with stunners. *‘Capturing prisoners! I’ll be a hero! Look out world, because Draco Malfoy is back on top where I belong!’*

He could move them into the vacant fourth year dorm nearby and stash them there, but it wouldn’t hurt to have a bit of help. He called out to the boy who had been pinned at a dead end. Smugly, he said, “I took care of them. We need to move before more show up!”

“Who’s there?” The boy called back. Draco couldn’t quite place the voice.

“Malfoy. Now move your arse!”

“Oh, just the person I’ve been looking for! *Tonare!*”

Draco leapt backward and the blasting curse impacted the wall next to him, showering him with stone chips. He grimaced in pain and

shielded against the second spell, moving backwards. Spells were flying at him at an almost impossible speed. Summoning a torch holder off the wall he used it to block the next pair of curses. Who in Grindelwald's name was he fighting? He blocked a bludgeoner and answered in kind, when the burning heat of a spell dug into his shoulder, causing him to sink to the ground.

One of the stunned bodies was banished into and through the shield Draco had erected. He tried to fight his way free of the dead weight on top of him and swallowed hard when his wand was summoned from the ground next to him. The shaped staggered closer to him and he heard a hoarse cackling.

"Draco Malfoy, I've been dreaming of this day since first year."

Draco desperately felt around the body on top of him for a wand. His hand closed around a penknife in his pocket. It would have to do. He pulled it free as the body was magically levitated off of him. A stinging curse raised welts on his chest and caused him to yelp in pain.

"Fuck you Potter!" Draco guessed that the great hero had finally snapped.

"Oh you flatter me, Malfoy. I want to enjoy killing you. Get up!"

It wasn't Potter.

Draco tried to get to his feet, but was hit by a leg locker jinx and another stinging curse. He barely held on to the small penknife in the darkness of the hallway.

"Aw, what's the matter little ferret. Can't you do the counter to a simple leg locker? Are you a squib or something?" The words sounded familiar, of course he did that to first years all the time to watch them cry – so who could it be? The knife wasn't balanced for throwing, so he'd have to get him closer. Draco was a bully and he knew just what bullies liked.

"No! No! Stay back."



“You don’t seem to be complying, so let’s try something different. Maybe this will help you obey! *Crucio!* Wow that spell sure takes a lot out of you! How’d that feel? You really do scream like a girl. It’s not enough for you to be in pain, I need to see your blood.”

Draco wiped the spittle away, not caring who his assailant was as a pair of wounding curse carved thin lines of blood across his chest.

“Wait! I know things. I can tell you.”

The figure got closer. “What could you possibly tell me?”

“Names! I know names. Real Death Eaters! I can tell you.”

The mystery person shambled closer, levitating Draco up on his feet. Draco felt helpless, but kept the blade of the small knife hidden against his side as he struggled to maintain his balance.

“How interesting, but I don’t care about the Death Eaters. I just want to kill their children. They need to know what it feels like. They need to suffer like I have...”

His torturer’s sentence was cut short by voices in the distance. Distracted Draco saw the wizard look around him. “I guess I should quit wasting time and finish...”

Draco made certain that the wizard in front of him never finished that statement. He fell forward and shoved the knife as hard as he could. The blade buried itself to the hilt in his assailant’s chest making him stagger backwards. Draco was already crawling away, towards the corner as a bludgeoner slammed him forward and into the wall. Trying not to think about the pain, he kept crawling around the corner as fast as he could – leaving a bloody smear on the stones behind him. He spared a glance backwards as the wizard was now visibly staggering, but gaining on him.

Flames licked his back as an incendiary curse caught his pants on fire. He thrashed with his immobilized legs and put the flames out. A wand driven arrow plunged into his buttocks. The pain was too great. He flattened against the wall as the injured spell-caster closed. The

wizard took three more steps towards him and collapsed to the ground.

The voices were getting closer as Draco pulled the magical arrow out of his hindquarters and crawled forward to make certain the wizard was dead. No, but he was finally close enough to make out the face and the glassy eyes staring back at him.

“I don’t believe it! Neville Fucking Longbottom!” was all he could choke out before collapsing in exhaustion.

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## Chapter 37 – Hidden Agendas, Open Hostility

Monday September 23rd, 1996

### *The Horror at Hogwarts*

By

Rita Skeeter

*When I first heard the accounts, I thought to myself that it must be a horrible joke. You, my faithful readers, know as well as I that it was no joke – as reported in the Monday edition of the Daily Prophet, the Hogwarts Infirmary was a charnel house. Inside, our worst fears realized as thirteen schoolchildren – a sampling of the next generation that had been counting on us, had been cut down even before the prime of their lives had started. As of this writing, two additional young ones hover closely at Death's door, too injured to be moved, with healers being brought from St. Mungo's in a heroic effort to cheat the Grim Reaper out of a portion of his ill-gotten booty.*

*Owls bearing the ghastly news began to arrive at households across the land by lunchtime. The war had come home to our children, the ones least capable of defending themselves. How could this happen? Where does the responsibility lie? Who will ensure that this does not occur again? Filled with moral outrage, I have set out to answer these questions.*

*The 'Butcher of Hogwarts' was not the Dark Lord, but rather a fellow student named Neville Longbottom, son of the missing former Auror, Frank Longbottom, who was recently kidnapped along with his wife from the long term spell damage ward at St. Mungo's by forces opposing the Scrimgeour administration. For all intents and purpose, Neville was orphaned in the earlier attacks this summer and was actually commended for killing one of the Death Eaters who had massacred his family on that terrible night.*

*The saying 'you reap what you sow' has never been more true. For in destroying his family, but leaving him alive, the Dark Lord himself must bear part of the blame in creating the monster who, if the current rumors are to be believed, is also responsible for the other*

*nine deaths that have occurred under the age addled eyes of Albus Dumbledore this year.*

*I have often in my columns referred to him as 'the ageless blunder', and have called for his sacking on at least four different occasions in the past. I should feel smug knowing that I was correct in my assessment that he is a threat to the welfare of the students he claims to cherish above all other things, but I am not. Instead, I am empty and hollow – chilled by the cries of the twenty wounded students, and further subdued by those who will never cry again.*

*Suffice to say that if the Dark Lord helped to create this savage creature devoid of morals, it was the so-called watchful eyes of Albus Dumbledore that allowed the beast to roam the halls and mingle amongst our children. These two legends play a game of chess with our lives, so I wonder how surprised they were when one of the pawns developed plans of their own.*

*Was it not Dumbledore who hired the Vampire known as Coedus or Darius Longbottom? This is the second time just the last three years that the white bearded fool had employed a Dark Creature as a teacher! His power may indeed rival Merlin's, but his judgment rivals the common village idiot!*

*How much influence was the Vampire allowed to have over his descendant is a matter for conjecture? It fled Hogwarts, shortly before the massacre with rumors of Harry Potter in hot pursuit. The world may never know as Minister Scrimgeour, from his ad-hoc office at Auror Headquarters issued a 'terminate on sight' directive concerning the Vampire Coedus.*

*The environment surrounding the directive does not fill me with hope. Our Minister was driven from his seat of power by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named at the very same time the first of many children lay dying at the hands of the thrice-cursed Longbottom boy. Despite all the press releases surrounding the numerous arrests and seizures of property, it would certainly appear that the war isn't going nearly as well as the wandthumpers on the wireless programs would have us believe.*

*For every report of a group of foreign fighters and auction of seized property, there are rumors of Dark Creature movements and widespread disappearances. Dare I ask if anyone really believes that Cornelius Fudge is still alive and hiding in exile? No one ever found his body...*

*From my corner office here at the Daily Prophet, I can look out the window and see the empty streets of Diagon Alley. I've been firsthand to look upon the damaged hulk of our seat of government as the witches and wizards of Britain hunker down and wonder if their homes are warded as well as they could be. I cannot be certain anymore who is 'winning', but I know deep in my heart that we are all losing.*

Rita handed the parchment with tomorrow's lead story to her new 'editor' from the hastily formed Ministry of Public Information, Edgar Rhys-Smyth – every bit as pretentious as his hyphenated last name indicated. The wizard looked at the writing in front of him and pondered for a moment before taking a quill out and scratching through various words and lines.

He stopped after a third of the story had been 'sanitized' for release. "I'll be honest with you, *Miss Skeeter*, it'll be easier for you to just rewrite it. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named needs to be changed to He-Who-Must-Be-Defeated. Dark Lord is no longer authorized verbiage, you can say Dark Enemy or Dark Forces, but Lord implies that he has a noble standing and in a sense it legitimizes him. The whole part about it being unclear who is winning needs to go. We're not here to incite panic and this kind of negativity isn't helping anyone. You should mention early on the Minister's heroic escape from the Enemy's ambush. It is important for the public to understand that the Ministry *will* be rebuilt stronger than before and you need to emphasize the fact that had the Wizengamot approved the Minister's 'Defense of the Isles Act,' that the War could be better prosecuted in a more orderly fashion."

Rita stared incredulously at the man, "I figured this was coming! You've been trying to slap a muzzle on me for a decade now. You must be lapping this stuff up, Edgar."

The Ministry official, one of Scrimgeour's speech writers, shook his head. "I'm afraid you are mistaken, Ms. Skeeter, I am just doing my job like the '*efficient little Ministry Drone*' you've delighted in calling me for so long." He paused and cleared his throat, "The Dumbledore stuff is fine. In fact, you can even take it up another notch or two if you so desire."

"So, you're really going through with this," she replied. "You won't get away with silencing the press."

"The State of Emergency Declaration passed by the latest session of the Wizengamot does give the Minister of Magic the authority to act in the best interest of the people of England – effectively for the next six weeks martial law has been declared. The owner of the Prophet stands to gain a good deal. His circulation goes up here and abroad he can act with righteous indignation and his circulation goes up everywhere. You of all people know how scandal sells. Listen Rita, this isn't a negotiation. It's the way it's going to be. You can be a part of the team...or not, the choice is yours. We can put your column on hiatus for a few weeks, if you don't really feel like writing right now. Let me just say that the administration will look more favorably on the reporters who cooperated with us during the State of Emergency."

"Is that a threat?"

The man, whom she had skewered on several occasions, grinned wolfishly at her, "No, my dear. I'm merely explaining the new reality, Rita. Right now there's a tide of support for the Minister. The Defense of the Isles Act *will* be passed soon and not even a so-called 'Dark Lord' can stand against an army. When we win, we're going to look out for the people who helped us get there. You're the biggest name at this paper and we'd love to have you onboard with our team, but we're not going to strong arm you or anything. It's really your choice."

"Merlin himself will return before I let you tell me what I can or cannot write!"

"I'm really sorry to hear that from you Miss Skeeter. As I recall, you're only forty-three, and the current phrasing of the mobilization section talks about able-bodied Wizards and Witches under the age of forty-

five and you know that any exemptions need to be approved by the Ministry. You don't have any kids to take care of and if the paper were to let you go, you wouldn't even have that to fall back on and your registered talents as an insect Animagus are highly coveted. When you think about it, that's a bit of a sticky situation to be in, if you know what I mean? It's really not a good idea to be unemployed right about now. You can either fly with the wind or against the wind. Tell you what, you go take the rest of the day off and think about your role here. For tomorrow's issue, we'll just run a heartfelt apology and tell your fans that you are far too distraught to piece together a proper article. I just don't want to see you make a rash decision that you'll up regretting later..."

Rita walked away from the smiling man knowing that she was in a no-win situation, but like everything other challenge life had thrown at her, she'd find a way to come out on top – she always had before. The winds of change shift all the time and without warning.

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Draco Malfoy limped along the halls of Hogwarts, for the first time in the three days since the attack – headed for a triumphant return to the Slytherin common room. Every step was a painful reminder of the still-healing flesh on the backs of his legs. It was ironic that he used to mock all the younger years that were forever crowding the hallways making noise and carrying on.

The passageways of Hogwarts were deathly silent in the wake of the 'Longbottom Massacre.' Students were not allowed to roam the halls without an adult escort. Meals were being served in the common rooms. Dumbledore had promised harsh penalties for the next person to draw their wand in anger. After all these years of posturing about no wandwork in the hallways, they were actually going to enforce it.

Despite it all, Draco was back on top. He had stopped the killer. After all this time, he actually was a hero! Even a few of the Ravenclaws had congratulated him – true they were the close friends of the one Ravenclaw student Longbottom had killed, but even so.

Waking up in the infirmary, he heard Pansy of all people arguing with McGonagall and Vector. It seems that the necklace Longbottom had

given her was a bride tether and according to the laws that were still in effect, but rarely enforced, Pansy was claiming to be the Matriarch of the Longbottom line. She said that the use of that artifact, the fact that Pansy was of age and the relationship had been consummated was evidence of a legitimate betrothal, and as such, she was insisting that she be transported to the next Wizengamot meeting to claim the two votes held by the Longbottom family and a follow-on trip to Gringotts for a full accounting of her new holdings.

He was actually impressed by the bint! It might be months before she could walk on her own again and a full year until she was fully recovered, but it looks like Parkinson's ship had finally arrived, even if its pier was nothing more than a smelly broom cupboard. Still it was nice to know he was free of her. She had given him cow eyes in the Infirmary, but there was no way he was taking her back – not now.

Draco had other options and had earned cheers of his own for his actions that night. With the majority of the house in the hospital wing, Dumbledore had brought the rest of the Slytherins in to talk to them as a whole. He let the old fool prattle on about the great loss, the hopes for a speedy recovery by all, and the efforts to contact parents and family members who were unable to come to the castle because of certain legal problems. When Dumbledore finished, Draco's prefect badge landed at the Headmaster's feet.

"Your words are meaningless – like this badge! I, for one, do not suffer fools and I will not wear your symbol anymore. What good are your apologies to the bodies in the storage room? Why should we believe that you will keep us safe in this school? People in my father's generation always spoke of you as a legend, but you're nothing but a faded has been! Where is your pet bird? Why does it not come here to cry healing tears for us? Are we Slytherins not good enough for you? I heard that a week ago it was singing a command performance for Potter!"

There were cheers of agreement as Draco finished his rant. The wizard he insulted retrieved the badge and stared at it before answering. "Regrettably, Fawkes has just had his burning day. It will be another three days before he can be asked to perform any tasks. Rest assured that I will indeed bring him into the ward as soon as his



powers can be of any use. I am deeply saddened that you have chosen to resign from your position. I would ask that you take time and reconsider this and we can discuss this at a later date -- in private."

The Head Girl spoke up as well, waving a piece of parchment, "I have something to say as well, Professor. I will stay on as Head Girl, but only at the behest of my father. You have lost any and all respect that I had for you. I've heard that the necklace Longbottom used was either given to him by Potter or stolen from Potter's private quarters depending on who is telling the tale. Whichever story is to be believed does not matter! What matters is why the bloody hell Potter was able to bring such an artifact into Hogwarts in the first place? What other threats to our safety are you allowing your 'chosen one' to harbor in his private sanctuary? Everyone is claiming that Longbottom was twisted into a pawn by the Vampire who was conveniently driven out of the castle by Potter."

She paused for emphasis stopping at one of the badly injured third years and looked down in pity, "Maybe Longbottom really was Potter's pawn and Potter is even now covering his tracks. After all, Parkinson said that Longbottom admitted to the dead Weasley girl that Potter was in on it. Parkinson will even verify it under truth serum! Will Potter submit to truth serum, or will you protect him, as you always have? I'd love to ask him if he has ever personally used that necklace on anyone, or if he has ever performed any other Dark Rituals? I demand to be present when you personally search his quarters and remove his cache of Dark Artifacts and illegal tomes. Just this morning, in my capacity as Head Girl, I asked the leader of the House Elves to tell me the names of the books on Mr. and Mrs. Potter's private book shelves. Would you care for me to read the list aloud? A good number of them are on the Ministry's banned and restricted list and I do believe that possession of two of the tomes in and of itself constitutes a criminal offense. I have already sent this list to my father, so you'll likely be hearing about it at the next Wizengamot session as well."

Draco smiled recalling the angry shouts of the students that pretty much drove the old man out of the ward as the Nurse attempted to

restore order. His wistful smile also included the wink and the ruthless smile on the Head Girl's face when they locked eyes.

"It is good to see you smiling, my son."

He regarded his 'escort', "I do not require conversation, merely an escort to the common room."

"Step into this room, Draco." The gentle tone of his mother vanished as she gestured towards a door in front of him.

"I don't believe I will. Unless things were different when you were a student, that door doesn't lead to the dungeon and I do not need to listen to any more of your worthless prattle." He wondered if his haughty tone would remind her of his father.

Narcissa responded to his cold glare by grabbing his head and using it as a door knocker. She then turned the handle and thrust him in the room. "I was not asking, in the room, now!"

He stumbled into the room and spun trying to draw his wand only to find hers leveled at his chest already. "Don't even think about it, Draco. I brought you into this world, and I can damn well take you out of it. If I wanted to harm you, you'd have more than a thump to your thick head right now. I spent the entire morning preparing this room so we can talk without anyone hearing. My privacy wards are among the best in all the land. We can speak freely here."

"Like I have anything to say to a blood traitor, even one that I used to call my mother."

"Fine, I'll talk, you listen and you better damn well listen hard, boy. I'm trying to make certain we both live through this. I'll make myself useful to the so-called 'light' side and you keep doing what you've been doing. When the time comes both of us can call in our markers to spare the other one's life. Whichever side wins, we will be safe. Had you taken my offer to go to Durmstrang, our dangerous game would not be necessary, but no -- you had to come back here. Now, I am going to tell you what I know and you are going to deliver that information *via* the Caruthers girl."

Draco was shocked by the forceful tone. "What do you know?" he managed to say.

"Potter and Dumbledore are having our old estate warded. The boy intends to celebrate the Winter Holidays there and celebrate a formal wedding, beyond the handfasting. Potter is against it, but Dumbledore and supposedly the Minister want to give the people a symbol of hope. I have volunteered the location of the secret entrance to our former estate."

Draco immediately understood his mother's statement. There was more than one secret entrance to the estate.

She smiled, "That's right; we will arrange a crucible and put all the warring factions there. Whoever comes out of that place alive will most likely be the winner – winner takes all. The best case for us is that they destroy each other, but as I am in good with Potter and Dumbledore's faction, I believe that I can spare your life if they are victorious. I am counting on you to do the same with mine, should the Dark Lord triumph."

Draco thought about this for a moment, "I don't know if that is within my power. You were directly responsible for the death of one of his inner circle."

His mother scoffed at him, "I don't picture the Dark Lord crying into his cups about my sister, husband or the other fallen members of his inner circle. You seem to be under the notion that being a Death Eater is like being a member of a Quidditch team. They are a means to an end. Why am I still discussing this with you? Never mind, I will Oblivate you and approach the Head Girl directly. I had hoped you had the required skill to help me pull this off ..."

"Wait, Mother!" Draco hastily sputtered, "Give me a moment to think this through." In his mind, Draco's thoughts raced over the possibilities. "Yes. It could work."

"I wouldn't have proposed it, if it would not work, but I am pleased that you can see the possibility of a favorable outcome. You and I can end this before this idiotic war insures that there is no Magical Britain left for our family to rule. If the slaughter goes on much longer the

Goblins will sense a weakness and rise – perhaps even the centaurs as well. Regrettably, we are almost out of time and I need a decision from you – in or out?”

Draco looked squarely at the cold eyes regarding him, “I’m in.”

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Harry pressed a rejuvenating draught to his lips– his second of the day. In his Animagus form, he was able to rest at night and ignored the ravings of the thing that masqueraded as his mother, but the ever present drain was still there. Initially, Flitwick had balked at letting Harry return to training and still worried about the amount of rejuvenating drought Harry was consuming. Professional Duelers called it ‘pump and burn’ and the Charms Master warned him that long term usage could create health issues for him in the future.

Harry was still angry that Dumbledore, the Head Boy and Girl, and the four heads of house had ‘inspected’ his room and removed several books and items. He had been warned that it was going to happen by the paintings at Dumbledore’s behest and that allowed him to hide the Black Family Tapestry. Susan’s pregnancy – and Narcissa’s --would remain hidden for as long as possible.

“Wait Harry, take a break instead. Thirty minutes and we can begin again. You have returned to form, but you lack your former staying power. Since we cannot locate the source of your drain to eliminate it...” Filius paused – his mother had been one of his favorite students and it was a reminder to Harry that there were others that held her memory sacred.

Finally his instructor continued, “Let’s change tactics, shall we? We will have to work within your current limitations rather than try to push you to your breaking point. In place of unsustainable raw power, we will work on precision and accuracy. Transfiguration will replace conjuration. Where appropriate, animation replaces transfiguration. You will work on ending the fights quickly. When you shield, only use partial body shield instead blanket coverage. Ironically, this may actually make you a better fighter.”

“How do we go about doing this?”

“I’m going to bring some potions to our next training sessions.”

“Wait, I thought you didn’t want to use more potions.”

Flitwick scooped up the empty vial that Harry had used an hour earlier. “These will be about as far as you can be from restorative draughts. Imagine this is filled with ground fire crab shell commonly used in blistering powder, true Greek fire, darkness powder from Peru, or even simple sneezing powder. You smash it to the ground and immediately follow with *Vertixcis*. The gust of wind blows the powder at your enemy. It’s a far less draining spell and the unconventional tactics are harder to defend. Quite illegal in a duel, but you’re not learning how to duel. In the next few weeks, you must not become a Charms master or a master hex warrior. You must become the dirtiest, most underhanded trickster who is willing to do whatever it takes to seize the advantage in a fight and pound it home. If you want to really test your mettle against the likes of Albus Dumbledore, honor and fair play need to be forgotten. Do you think you can do that?”

It took less than an instant for Harry to answer, “Yes.”

“Good. Up until now, I have worked you to fight one on one and against multiple adversaries. After our session tomorrow, the people you face will be wearing Death Eater Cloaks. You will no longer know who your opponents are. I need to remove the ‘respectful’ aspect of your fighting. The ‘faces’ of your opponents need to lose all meaning to you. Eventually, I’ll start working with you. You don’t have to be alone on the battlefield, hopefully you will not. You have a much better chance against him if both Albus and I are fighting him at the same time.”

“When do I get to try my hand against Dumbledore?”

“I think I can have you ready in two weeks. I’ll charm a bracer that will keep potion vials attached to it and unbreakable until you remove them. You should be able to carry two potions at a time. Tomorrow, we’ll get started on the various combinations to see which suits you. You’ll need to practice your bubblehead charm for best speed. Hopefully, you can get it down to a rapid smooth motion – throw with left hand and shatter, while wandling the charm to your head and then blow the powder towards your opponent.”

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Harry woke up in a cold sweat and shifted back into human form. Susan wiped his head with a damp cloth.

“Rough one, huh?”

“I keep telling myself that it’s all in my mind, but somehow it doesn’t really help.” He regretted waking her. She was pregnant with triplets and already the sleep deprivation had begun.

“Were you able to transform and get away from her?”

“Not at first, we ended up wrestling each other to the ground. Once I got free, I was able to fly away.”

“So what made this one worse than the others?” She snuggled against him, whispering despite the fact that there were alone.

“It’s probably, Dumbledore’s theory about her using my thoughts against me. She really tried to hammer home that I was responsible for what Neville did.” Harry answered slowly echoing the sentiments of what gossip was coming out of the remains of the Slytherin house. He skirted the real issue – it went much deeper than that. ‘Lily’ had spent most of the session explaining in vulgar detail how he didn’t love Susan and was just using her. It was cruel to listen to, but made much worse by the grain of truth it contained. Did he *really* love Susan or was the term ‘pity fuck’ as applicable as the demon in his subconscious made it sound?

She yawned rather loudly and then chuckled at herself, “Sorry. Well, three hours is more than you’ve been usually been getting. You should relax for a while and calm down before you attempt round two.”

“You should get some rest. If I can’t get back to sleep, I’ll do some reading, even though they took the most useful books ...” he muttered.

He felt Susan shift behind him and rolled back over finding her propped up on one elbow. “Still a bit bitter about that, eh?”

“A tad – you go ahead and go back to sleep,” Harry hesitated before adding, “I love you.” He had said the words before, but this time it was almost as if he was trying them out.

He couldn’t see her smile but heard her respond with her own proclamation of affection and he tried to see if hearing her say it made him feel any better. A minute passed before she spoke up again. “What does she say about me?”

Harry hesitated and Susan prodded more, “She probably says a whole bunch of things about me and you haven’t been telling me to protect me – am I right?”

“Yeah,” he saw no point in denying it.

“Well, if this thing is just using your self-doubts against you, you have to decide what you believe in – stray thoughts in your mind given voice by a creature trying to kill you or the warmth we share in this bed?”

“Seems kind of silly when you put it like that, doesn’t it?”

“That’s what I thought. We didn’t deserve this. We should be trying to figure out how to snog in broom closets and not what to name the triplets. By the way, I asked Hermione who Moe, Larry and Curly are. I’m hoping that you were joking. Two of them are girls.”

Harry laughed in spite of himself, “Moe and Curly *could* be girl’s names!”

“*Sure* they could,” Susan responded, wearing her ‘tell me another’ expression.

“No, I was just exhausted and feeling cheeky when you ask me. How about we name the girls after your mum and auntie?”

“Really?”

“Why not? Dana and Amelia Potter sound like good names. What about the baby boy?”

“Albus? Sorry, bad joke, but not much worse than your three Muggle comedians.”

“Oi, that’s a horrible name! Right up there with Severus? How about we call him George Rubeus Potter?”

“Not your Godfather?”

“No. If he needs a legacy to live up to, how about one guy who loved to have fun and another who was brave and loyal to a fault?”

“I’m still a bit skeptical about Rubeus as a middle name, but George gets no real objection from me.”

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Coedus cracked his eyelids. They felt rather heavy. It was the same feeling he used to get when he had dined on someone who’d been drunk before he’d extracted their blood. Everything was in a fog. Where was he? What was he doing here? His eyes tried to dart around the room filled with candles and pungent odors, but he felt so weak.

Something was different? He tried to put his finger on it and then saw the body flat on the slab next to him. It was his Vampire body. The thing that was different was the constant flow of blood through his veins and the steady stream of air into his lungs.

“Say something,” a tired Lord Voldemort commanded him.

“The transference worked. I am human again.” Coedus said, staggering to a basin where he vomited suddenly. He purged himself twice; it was disconcerting to experience bodily functions again. Using a towel to wipe the spittle from his face, he turned and reached for the stick of wood that would truly determine the success of this ritual.

“Your old vampire body is awake, but incoherent. I have restrained and silenced it. Your first task, my newest servant, is to eliminate the creature.”



His first spell in over a century! What should it be? There was only one choice that made sense. "*Crucio!*" The rush of power left his new wand and the immobilized pathetic beast struggled against the magic holding it in place. To have been without for so long, deprived of all but the most meager of magics, it had been agony. The agony was over. It was time for revenge! Staring into the pain-wracked eyes of his former shell, he pitied Frank Longbottom. He felt the momentary pull of the Vampiric hypnosis. Impressive for one only just turned, but futile as Coedus used the wand and severed the head from his former body in one quick violent gesture.

"Are you prepared to take my Mark?"

"Yes. Darius Longbottom lives again and I will do as you command."

"Excellent. This may hurt slightly."

"A moment of pain is nothing compared to a century of disappointment."

The Dark Lord stabbed the wand into the flesh of the forearm and branded the man, who smiled despite the obvious pain. "You have a few weeks to get used to your new body Darius. I will have need of you soon. Go and find Pettigrew. Peter will tell you where your room is. He alone knows your identity. I would recommend that you keep the mask on among my servants. Several may recognize Frank Longbottom and given the circumstances, they may hold you accountable for the boy's actions."

Darius took the robes and Death Eater mask from the table. Voldemort surprisingly had honored their agreement and now he was alive again! For the first time in what seemed ages, he was tired and looked forward to a night's rest.

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Lord Voldemort watched his newly-minted servant leave. He too was exhausted from the ritual, but pleased with the result. If need be, he would sacrifice Longbottom to the most bloodthirsty of his minions, who were currently clamoring for an attack on Hogwarts itself in retribution for the deaths of their children, but it shouldn't reach that

point. He had instead directed their considerable anger towards the Ministry and staged several raids using the more zealous ones.

Peter caught up to him in the passageway, "Milord, I have assigned the new recruit to his room."

"Excellent, leave him alone for the next twenty-four hours and then place him on Rookwood's team. Tell Augustus his next mission is a standard Muggle culling and to make certain our new recruit kills his fair share. After that, we'll make certain he sees some actual combat."

Voldemort delivered his instructions and headed for the Apparition point. He needed had chosen a course of action. It was time for Lily Potter to stalk her prey.

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Standing in the Room of Requirements, Albus Dumbledore felt ill at ease, clad in a Death Eater cloak and mask. Both he and Filius agreed that Harry should face him first incognito. It would negate the considerable mystique behind the legend that he was supposed to be. A glamour replaced his missing arm. There was nothing, however, that could replace the heaviness in his heart. He had meekly taken the insults of the children. There was nothing else to do. No amount of apologies would restore their classmates. Self-doubt gnawed at him. Had he hung on too long? Was he truly a fossil of a bygone time – a dinosaur roaming the land, whose time had passed?

The answer was a sobering 'perhaps', but even a dying dinosaur was a fearsome opponent. His heart still beat, for now, and his lungs still drew breath – albeit with some difficulty. He had no intentions of letting Harry win. He merely hoped that Flitwick's praises of Harry's recent progress were based on reality rather than wish fulfillment.

He stared at the young man on whose shoulders were loaded with such responsibility. The room was a replica of the area around the Gamekeeper's Hut. It reminded him how sorely he missed Hagrid's zest for life. Although he was older, it seemed that the deaths carried more of a price in this war.

“Begin!” Filius’ voice rang out from the small broom he rode above them.

Typically, Albus would almost always allow his opponent the first blow – however consistent with his current garb, he opted to deviate from the norm, opening with a powerful bludgeoner.

Harry dodged the spell and returned a pair of weak but fast bludgeoners of his own – likely to test the maneuverability of his opponent. He blocked both of them, opting not to yield the information the boy sought. Albus sent a flurry of weaker spells, mixing leg lockers and other incapacitation spells at the wizard. One leg locker managed to clip him, sending Harry falling to the ground, but the young man returned fire instead of trying to extricate himself. *Arttero Glacis* – his still-sharp eyes spotted that the ends of the ice shards were blunt instead of deadly.

Harry’s control was improving. That was a good sign. Subvocalising, Albus transfigured the ice coming at him into cords of rope and then banished them back at Harry who by then had easily countered the leg locker. In mid-flight, Albus animated them and commanded the enchanted ropes to ensnare his opponent.

A strong vanisher from Harry disintegrated them. Detaching himself slightly from the battle, Albus sensed that Harry used too much power on that spell. Perhaps the control was not as good as he had hoped or more likely, the adrenaline was getting the best of him.

Albus moved confidently, conjuring a series of stones and banishing them. Harry sent a detonation curse into them and used the spray of dust to make a counter move. Harry summoned a snake and was in the process of engorging it. Albus allowed the creature to grow and killed it before it could pose a threat. A rule in dueling was to never leave debris too close to you – even your own. Albus detonated the corpse just as he had done in his fight against Tom. It was far enough away that it wouldn’t harm him, but it would serve as a significant distraction. Harry rolled backwards from the blast, allowing Albus to quickly capitalize on his advantage by sending a flurry of spells at his target, mixing bindings, stunners and animal conjurations. The Gryffindor was being quickly overwhelmed. Part of Albus wanted to

let up, but it would serve no real purpose. Still, being swarmed by more than a dozen squirrels was rather cruel.

He caught a glint of something in Harry's hand that he smashed to the ground. A cloud of dust blew through the rodent army he'd set on Harry.

His protective charm was too slow as some of the dust was already inside the barrier. He sneezed violently and tried to shield against the spells that followed the dust. Even as debilitated as he was and gasping for breath, he still managed to block the first two stunners, but not the third.

Albus came to with worried-looking Filius holding the cursed breathing mask to his face. "I apologize, Albus. With your damaged lungs, the powder Harry used placed you in a bit of distress. You gave us a scare there."

For his part, Harry looked mortified. "I'm sorry sir."

He tried to dismiss it, but he was having problems drawing enough air to make a humorous remark. If this kept up, how would he ever get through his speech at the remembrance ceremony tomorrow afternoon? Helped to his feet by a boy nearly one tenth his age brought a new sense of betrayal and despair to the once mighty Albus Dumbledore. His magic felt diminished and his body a mere fractured shell of what he had once been.

Fawkes was too immature to transport him to his quarters, so he relied on the young man and his Charms professor to assist him. He had never felt more pathetic in his entire life.

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Susan leaned into Harry as he sagged against her. He was exhausted and she knew why. She had witnessed this morning's training session with Harry fighting Minerva McGonagall. For twenty solid minutes the two of them fought to a standstill. She had been impressed by the sheer inventory of spells possessed by their Transfiguration instructor. It renewed her respect for the head of Gryffindor's talent, stamina and power.

Harry had lost today, but he was winning as much as he was losing. He took the losses hard and shrugged off the wins as meaningless. She had to be the optimist for both of them. Now, if they could only get rid of the monster draining on his magic, Harry would truly be a sight to behold! Last night she had forced him into the Pensieve to watch her memory of the night he had saved her, if for no other reason than to remind him how far he had come in such a short period of time.

Tomorrow would mark two weeks since Neville had gone on a rampage. The teachers had waited to hold the ceremony until the last Slytherin had been deemed 'out of danger' and all but two had been released from St. Mungo's. Susan found it hard to reconcile the shy boy she had seen sobbing about his lost family over the summer with the murderous psychopath portrayed in the press.

Sitting on her right side was Hannah Abbott, who was gripped not only by her own grief, but everyone else's as well. Hannah had convinced herself that *she* had played a large role in the death of Ginny Weasley. Both Chelsea and her parents had insisted that she not attend such an emotionally charged gathering, but she was defiant and had come anyway. Susan squeezed Hannah's hand gently and received a grateful look from her housemate.

Behind her, at the Gryffindor table, Hermione Granger shot her a look of sympathy. They had talked quite a bit in the last few days. Not even the Abbotts were aware that she was already pregnant. Hermione was the one person she could talk to on this topic at the moment. They had never really been close, but they were becoming much better friends.

Most of the others were taking their seats and the teachers up front were looking as solemn as ever, when a disturbance near the doorway caught her attention. Harry suddenly perked up next to her.

"I said that I don't think anything should be said about that murderous bastard Longbottom – you insipid, poorly bred Negro. Is your hearing as defective as your lineage?"

Dean Thomas, who many knew still carried a torch for Ginny, snarled back at Peter Yaxley, "And I think they should have given him a bloody medal!"

People stood -- angry shouting started. Susan heard Hannah sob audibly as the first spells lashed out. Teachers and Aurors moved in, but the atmosphere was too charged as a brawl broke out.

Harry's weight shifted and he was suddenly crouching on the Hufflepuff table with a barricade shield absorbing a trio of spells launched in his direction. Susan's wand was in her hand and she erected her own shield in front of Harry. Harry sensed it, and unleashed a massive wave of energy. In the Pensieve memories she had witnessed Dumbledore using the same wedge stunner to evade arrest by Fudge and his supporters. Harry lacked the Headmaster's precise control to pick and choose his targets, but six people dropped and five more stumbled drunkenly. Someone, either McGonagall or more likely Dumbledore, animated the large Hogwarts banner that then dropped on those still trying to fight, restraining them.

Dumbledore's magically enhanced voice rose above the din, "Enough! Everyone sit down! You will return to your dormitories! No one will be permitted in the halls today!"

The spell took an enormous toll on Harry, who collapsed on the table. The Aurors and the teachers began to take control. A few of the 'troublemakers' were collected; several students were injured, but none seriously. In the instance of a few Slytherins, they were returned to the care of the Nurse they had just recently escaped and all the rest of the sent back to their dormitories. Harry was supported by Susan and Remus Lupin as Tonks led the way to their private suite.

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Tonks was paying more attention to the corridors in front of her rather than the carefully folded map in her hand. Even if she had been paying attention, she was scanning the castle, not the grounds. She would not have noticed a dot appearing on the edge of the map labeled 'Lily Potter.'

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## Chapter 38 – An Overdue Reunion

Saturday October 5th, 1996

The taste was magnificent; he swirled the mixture over his tongue as he savored the complex flavors. In truth, it was only a bowl of French vanilla ice cream, but for the first time in over a century he had a flavor other than the metallic taste of blood in his mouth. Darius Longbottom was eager to indulge in all the pleasures that his new life offered. For now, the simple dessert in front of him would suffice.

Closing his eyes, he basked in the warmth of the sun on his face. It was no longer something to be feared and avoided at all costs. Magic flowed through his veins again! A year ago, this would've seemed like a foolish delusion, an impossibility that should be cast into the darkest corner of his mind and not allowed to intrude upon his conscious thought.

"I take it from the expression on your face that I have another satisfied customer," said the voice of Florean Fortescue.

"Indeed, it is like a tiny slice of perfection," he replied easily.

The shop owner replied, "That's probably the nicest thing a customer has said to me all month. In these troubling times, we must cling to what little happiness we can find."

Darius quickly finished the rest, tucked the half gallon he had ordered to go under his arm, and stood to leave. Two men approached him. They wore armbands indicating that they were part of Minister Scrimgeour's auxiliary force. "Good day to you citizen, would it be possible for you to show us your papers?"

"You'll forgive me if I am not sure what you are speaking of; I have just returned from my summer holiday on the continent and am unaware of these papers."

Darius surveyed the two men. The first was an older wizard who appeared to only be making a token effort at his assigned duty. The other was a young go-getter, eager to please. *He* would be trouble.

“What is your name?”

“Davies, cut the man some slack. This isn’t an inquisition. We’re sorry to have disturbed you.”

The one called Davies protested, “Our orders say that we are to bring personal without papers to Auror Headquarters. I don’t recall there being any exceptions.”

It reminded Darius of the times he had frequented the battlefields and towns during World War Two. History does in fact repeat itself. He addressed the younger man. “Tell me, Mr. Davies, how many Death Eaters have you caught utilizing this method. Had I been a Death Eater, I would have Apparated or Portkeyed out of here already.”

“But we would have your facial features recorded and added to the ‘wanted for questioning’ list.”

“And if I were wearing glamours to disguise my appearance?”

“Then I would dispel them like so, *finite incantem!* See! You’re obviously not wearing glamours.”

Darius sighed and looked at the other man who was desperately trying to ignore the spectacle his partner was creating. “I suppose that *would* work if I were wearing glamours from your average beauty catalog, but don’t you think any Death Eater worth his salt would have disguises that would hold up to a simple dispel magic? Here, let me show you a different and more effective technique.”

He drew his wand; it was the best match to be found within the Dark Lord’s storeroom which meant that it was only mediocre at best. “Now, more potent revealing spells like *Ostendo sum Expiscor*, will take down all but the best disguises. Here let me show you the wand movements, a gentle swish to your left and then a tapping motion with your wand. See? Now you try.”

The young man was suitably impressed, “Where did you learn that spell?”



“Auror training, a long, long time ago. Now please, Mr. Davies, the wand motions.”

“Yes of course, *Ostendo sum Expiscor*, what!”

Darius shoved his wand in the young man’s face as the glammers disappeared and cast a jet of acid squarely in Davies’ open mouth. A quick severing charm then decapitated his partner as the older man struggled to pull his wand out. He summoned both of the men’s wands to him. The wand belonging to Davies was a much better match; it was a pity that he couldn’t ask him what it was at the moment. Taking a moment to enjoy the first kills since his return to life, he chided himself as the screams started. Old habits were hard to break. He wasn’t a vampire any more. They weren’t his food; he shouldn’t play with them. Besides, the *finite* cast earlier had removed the cooling charms on his ice cream. It would be a shame to waste such a treat by standing here, watching the man’s face dissolve into goo while his ice cream did the same. Darius’ last thought as he Apparated was, *I should have gotten some cherries*.

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Tonks was watching down the corridor when Remus came out of the Potter suite. “How is he?”

Her werewolf lover shrugged, “He’s exhausted. He’d dueled Minerva this morning and was in no shape to get into a scrape like that. Right now he is arguing with his wife. She wants him to take a calming draught and get some rest. He’s insisting on taking a pepper-up potion. I’m not sure which of his stubborn parents are to blame.”

She laughed at his attempted joke. Ironically enough, she’d met both James and Lily Potter at her sixth birthday party. The party had taken an interesting turn when her black hair suddenly altered to match Lily Potter’s auburn mane. They had thought it was a standard bout of accidental magic until her mother found she couldn’t reverse it. It was the day they discovered her special talent.

“Things are getting bad and I’m not just talking about here in the castle. I got an owl from Mum yesterday. She’s saying that it’s only a matter of time before the Minister’s Mobilization Act is passed through

the Wizengamot. Diagon Alley already resembles a military camp. They're pretty close to getting out. I'm already an Auror, so I'm exempt, but what are you going to do, Remus?"

"I'll likely purchase an exemption. From the wills of Sirius and the Potters, I have more than enough to afford the ten thousand galleon fee. They'll likely pay attention to anyone who purchases one, but unlike others, I'm a known quantity. I was speaking to Bill and he said that the Ministry is leaning on the Goblins very hard. They're seeking a report of any transaction of more than a thousand galleons. So far, the Goblins have refused."

"Do you think we should get out too?" Tonks asked, "We could head to South America or Australia. Sirius told me about that little island he lived on in the South Pacific. That could be us, what do you say to sandy beaches as far as the eye can see?"

Remus shook his head, "I can't. I owe too much to Albus and Harry."

"What about us? You and me? Where do I fit in? I was a wreck after Azkaban fell and you put me back together. Now that I'm 'fixed,' is that little project over?"

His voice was thick with emotion. "That's not it, Dora, and you know it! You want to hear me say it? I'll say it. You - mean – *everything* - to - me. That's why I'm asking you not to run away just yet, because if you just say the word, I'll do it. I'll hate myself, but I'll do it in a heartbeat. I'm tired of all this loss. I have more dead friends than living ones left and I damn near lost you as well."

Tonks was instantly sorry that she pushed it this far. "Remus, I..."

"Dora, I have two things left in this world that I value: my honor and you. Honor doesn't keep me going anymore. It doesn't warm me in the night. You do."

Tonks buried herself in his arms both ashamed of her behavior and inspired by his words. They held each other for a few moments before she sniffled loudly and broke away. "Why don't I see if one of the other Aurors in the castle can stand guard here for a while and you and I can go some place and talk?" Normally, this would be

followed by a saucy wink, but Tonks knew her lover had just bared his soul to her. She really did just want to talk – at least for a little bit.

He reached down to recover the map that she had discarded. “Let’s see, all the dorms are full for a change. Where are our good friends, the Aurors? Oh no! Tonks, get your wand!”

“What is it?” she squeezed in next to him to look at the parchment. Most of the Aurors were on the outside of the castle, facing scores of dots all labeled, “Lily Potter.”

“Warn Harry and Susan, I’ll try to help the Aurors!”

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She heard voices around her, “I caught one! It’s some kind of flying beetle, but it’s registering on the map as Lily Potter. It’s some kind of trick!”

“Most are headed towards the castle. Ignore the ones going for the lake and the Quidditch pitch. Brogans! One’s right next to you!”

“I don’t see a bee...ahh!!!!”

Lily slashed the one in front of her and hurled him to the side; nothing would get in her way.

“Donaldson! See to Brogans! Focus on that area. Bracket her. Ropes, chains, and chalk cloud we have to negate the invisibility.”

A rope hits her and starts to wrap around her arm. She shredded it. This was taking too long. She needed to hunt. Her prey was inside, but these others kept getting in her way. Only her prey should be able to see her. Only those that shared the blood, but still these others interfered with their glowing sticks and screaming noises.

“There! Damn it! She’s fast. Seal the castle doors!”

A spell hit her, pushing her away from where she needed to go. The monster that was Lily Potter gashed the one shouting orders and with an unnatural strength, hurled him a dozen meters. Something else

hits her! Pain! She could feel pain, but she did not bleed. Several more glowing lights flashed at her, but she was fast enough to dodge. This one wasn't in her way anymore. There was nothing between her and the castle where her prey was hidden from her. So, she ran as the colored lights swept past her, towards the closing doorway.

She was much faster, but even she was not fast enough to reach the door in time. She pounded at the door with her clawed fists but they did no good. Her claws dug into the wood as she pulled herself up. Above her was a window. Part of her knew that glass was weaker than wood and so she climbed up a surface enchanted to prevent exactly what she was doing. She smashed through a window thought to be unbreakable. She was inside. Her prey was here and she was coming for him.

A half moaning grunt was heard by the paintings, who wondered what the sudden disturbance in the second floor corridor was.

"Haaaarrrry!"

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"Bloody hell, I just got him to take a calming draught!" Harry heard Susan's voice through the fog in his mind.

"Then hit him with a double dose of pepper-up. We need to get moving!" Harry knew he should be more curious about what they were talking about, but he felt so strange. Susan pressed something to his lips and he drank the liquid. She pressed another vial to his lips. Halfway through, he started gagging and clutched his chest as he felt excruciating pain go through his body.

Harry fell from the chair onto the floor and emptied the contents of his stomach. His first words came out awkwardly. "Whatzz goin on?"

"Harry! That thing that they made from your mother is in the castle. We have to go! It's going to try and kill you!"

The words didn't make any sense. His mother was dead, a long time ago. Still, he wasn't in a position to argue. How could she be here?

Why were they running away? Where were they going? It was hard to think.

He heard Susan ask Tonks, "Should I try another dose?"

"Only if you want him dead before his mum gets here! Get him moving towards Dumbledore's office. I'll rearguard. Nigellus! Is Dumbledore in his office?"

"No, he's at the Ministry. One of the other paintings is alerting Professor McGonagall in Gryffindor tower."

Susan pulled him towards the door as his feet wavered unsteadily beneath him. "Instead of the office, we'll head for the Room of Requirement and have it make a sanctuary that she can't get into!"

Tonks agreed and told the paintings to pass word to Professor McGonagall to meet them in the 7th floor corridor. Fear and a pounding heartbeat were helping to clear his mind and he staggered less as they ran through the hallways towards the moving staircases in the central atrium.

-----

Lord Voldemort stood amongst the burning wreckage from a Ministry recruiting station. Scrimgeour was so confident that he would get his army that he had already opened several offices around Diagon Alley to encourage those who wanted to be in on the "ground floor" of such a mighty endeavor to go ahead and sign up. It was the second one he had destroyed today.

He regretted having to use Lily now, especially in light of recent news received, but the magic powering the Revenant could not last much longer. The damage done when Potter had destroyed his father had weakened the spell's binding power. He had hoped to use her on the night of his Halloween offensive, but that would not be possible. Tonight's raid, coupled with Peter's charm work to defeat their precious "Marauder's Map" would give an opportunity for success.

His men were under strict orders to avoid damaging the buildings around the recruiting stations. It needed to be symbolic to show that this was a conflict of Voldemort versus the Ministry.

Four broom riders circled above him. He swatted their feeble curses aside and sent a burst of magic that knocked one from her broom and scattered the rest. "Is that all you have?" One of his more potent transfigurations turned the flailing witch's body to glass. She shattered on impact with the street. "Is there not one among you that can stand against my power?" His wand emitted gale force winds, driving Scrimgeour's peons high into the sky as they fought to control their brooms.

"Perhaps a rematch is in order, Tom." The voice was like a whisper in his ear, but the owner stood over a hundred meters away with his Phoenix hovering above him.

Voldemort started towards his enemy, barely conscious of the duels being fought around him. There was a sense of casualness in his stride while he blocked an occasional errant spell. "What makes you think you'll fare any better than last time Albus?"

He watched Dumbledore discard a potion flask as he approached. What was the old man's game this time? "Hoping for enhance speed and reflexes? My rituals place me beyond any potion you could possibly brew."

Dumbledore staggered slightly and conjured a wall in the path of his first volley of curses. The dust cleared and a shorter figure emerged from the cloud of particulates. It was still Dumbledore's voice that spoke to him, but it faced him in the two armed body of Harry Potter. So, it was polyjuice that the fossil hoped would help him.

"Magic is a truly wonderful thing, Tom. Perhaps, there is a prophecy to be fulfilled today? I haven't felt this good in ages."

A furious dance began, cutting curses mixed with bludgeoners and spells of a slightly darker variety. Voldemort noticed that Dumbledore's style had changed noticeably. He still mixed in Transfiguration, but he was using more direct effect spells.

Breaking a sweat, the Dark Lord vanished a dozen Bludger-sized hailstones arcing towards him, returning fire with a bonebreaker that he had once used in Africa to snap an elephant in two. This was taking too long. He spared a glance behind him. More ministry forces were arriving. It was time to leave; he sent a burst of energy into the air, signaling his minions to disperse.

"I think I must bid you *adieu*, Albus. I thank you for the preview of your latest amusing trick. Farewell."

He activated his Portkey as a trio of lethal curses approached. It occurred to him that now it was Dumbledore who had something to prove.

-----

Harry clumsily followed the constant pull of Susan's arm as they entered the main atrium. He was still having a hard time focusing his vision, but there, three levels below was a pair of people struggling on the steps.

"One of them got inside. She's on the stairs with Remus! Where is she? I can't see her! You two go ahead, I've got to help him! Go! Now!" Tonks commanded ushering them up the steps.

"Come on Harry." They went up while Tonks went down. Entering the seventh floor they heard Tonks scream loudly. That shook the rest of the cobwebs out of Harry's skull.

"Susan, it's me she's after!"

"Welcome back Harry! Now can you please move faster?"

"I have to stop her!"

"You're not in any shape to fight. Circe! You can barely stand."

Harry quickly countered, "I'm not going to get any better while she's around!"

“We’re going to the Room of Requirement.” Susan commanded forcefully.

“Remus and Tonks are both probably hurt. I can’t run. I’ll use my Animagus form and draw strength back to me.”

Susan protested, but Harry’d already chosen his course of action. He transformed into the ebony raven and flew back down the corridor, carrying his holly wand with his foot.

The sight in front of him was both shocking and bizarre. Two barely human creatures fought against each other near the body of Remus Lupin. Tonks was recognizable only because of her pink hair. She must have lost her wand sometime during the fight. One of her hands had lengthened into claws that rivaled the red haired abomination. Tonks’ other hand was swollen like a melon and struck like a sledgehammer against a creature who didn’t seem to feel it. Her blows were wild and random.

Returning to his human form, he tossed his wand up and caught it with his right hand. “Up here Mother!”

The thing looked up, giving Tonks a chance to smash it with her mallet hand and send the creature over the railing.

“Harry, where is it? I can’t see it?” Tonks spun in a circle. Her robes were ripped and blood-soaked. He couldn’t see any open wounds – it was well known that Tonks could use her morphing skill to close her wounds, but still, she must have lost quite a bit of blood.

“You sent it over the side,” Harry answered.

“Help Remus first!” she screamed at him.

Harry screamed back, “Tonks behind you!” Moving more like a simian than something once human, his mother leapt back over the railing and pounced on Tonks, driving the Metamorphmagus’ face into the stairs with a painful crack. It barely paused for a moment before it came charging towards him. All of Tonks’ fighting had delayed the thing for not much more than a minute.



This horror wasn't his mother! He drew deep within himself and hurled a blasting curse right at it. "*Tonare!*"

The spell hit the thing in the face and fizzled. He tried a Reductor when it was only two meters in front of him. The creature slammed painfully into him. He now knew his magic was having no effect.

He was in deep trouble.

-----

Far below the conflict two people stood with their heads close together in the twisting passages of the Slytherin dormitory maze. If anyone were to stumble upon them, they would assume the couple was snogging. Draco's lips appeared to be greedily roaming the Head Girl's neck. The silencing spell was obviously a courtesy to any people wandering by one of the more well known "snogging spots."

Melissa had protested being locked in the dormitories by the Aurors and had made her case to Professor Vector. Denied yet again, she pretended to sulk before dragging Malfoy off into the maze.

In between kisses she whispered, "What do you know about what is going on?"

"Little more than you. Yaxley received an owl from his mother. I saw him destroy the message immediately afterwards. It was likely instructions to manufacture the disturbance at the ceremony."

She choked back down a slight moan. It was hard to focus on not enjoying this, but there were matters to attend to first. "It wouldn't be so obvious. My bet is on a charmed piece of parchment with a blood-based compulsion. That way they could question him under truth serum and not get a hint that he was ordered to do it. Hands Draco, mind your hands."

Draco's hands moved up her back and away from her bum. "Were you able to pass my information on to your father?"

"What I meant by 'hands' is if you're going to stoke my bum, do it right. Don't just squeeze - knead and caress. I'm not some engorged sex

toy for Morgana's sake! Parkinslut might enjoy being handled like a slab of beef, but you'll find I've slightly higher standards." Draco's hand returned to where they'd been. "Much better – there's hope for you yet. I was able to exchange a word or two when my father arrived, but they are watching me more closely than ever. I had to ask him a few questions to make certain he wasn't the Metamorph in drag, but the information is passed."

"So what do *you* think is going on?"

She felt herself flush as Draco continued his ministrations. This might not be so bad after all. He wasn't hard to look at and seemed to follow basic instruction, but he still talked too much. She moved to his lips, silencing him. "You ask too many questions. Until we are calling the shots, it's best to be more obedient and less curious. Unless, that is, you're curious about how flexible I am." She pulled her tiny frame up into his arms and brazenly wrapped her legs around him, making his eyes and other parts of his body bulge. She allowed him to press her back against the passageway wall and rhythmically ground against him. She grasped his hand, preventing him from unbuttoning his pants.

"No, no. This is good for now. This is a preview of what you can expect, if you continue to impress." Melissa resumed her motions, relishing his groans of pleasure mixed with frustration. She'd enjoy bending this one to her will. Perhaps father would let her keep him...

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Harry struggled against his mother's grasp, but she was too strong. He kicked at her knee, but it did nothing but put him off balance as she spun him back into the wall and raked her disfigured hands along his chest, drawing blood. Did his spells fail against it because his magic is what animates her corpse? He couldn't worry about that now! She was pulling his hands together so she could hold him with one claw.

Harry did the only thing he could think of and grabbed one of the shrunken vials attached to his enchanted bracer. Smashing it into her face as her claws filleted his left arm, opening it all along his forearm, the world exploded in a blast of flame that washed over him and

hurled the monster back down the steps. He struggled against the flames that had splashed onto his arm while pulling at his spare wand – the all consuming flame could only be extinguished by magic. It would burn him alive.

He doused his arm and saw the burning corpse racing towards him like a living fireball. He charmed the burning rug and tried to use it to stop her. It tore through it like tissue paper. Harry transformed and tried to fly, but his injured arm translated into an injured wing -- he flapped feebly on the stairs as the burning death prepared to engulf him.

*“Conicio Telum! Pello Hostis! Atrreo Glacis!”*

The ballista bolt stopped the monster's progress, the banisher sent it careening into the wall behind it, and then jagged shards of ice ripped into its flesh. Susan Potter descended the steps like an avenging angel, hurling a volley of destructive spells at the abomination. Severing charms began tearing whole chunks out of what had once been his mother. Still it struggled forward. Harry returned to his human form and grabbed his spare wand. It was like his fight with Voldemort. Direct magic from him wouldn't work. He conjured stones and his wife banished them into the creature. After the third one, it was too battered to rise and Susan stepped past him and began using her cutting curses to hack it into pieces. Harry slouched onto the steps and started closing the bloody gashes on his arm and chest while he marveled at the savage Hufflepuff fury of his wife. He felt weak from the blood loss, but that was offset by a thundering surge as his magic returned to him.

“Susan, it's over. You've destroyed it.”

She turned back to him, eyes ablaze, panting heavily. The mask of fury faded as she looked at him.

“You're a mess Harry, here.” She fished a vial of blood replenisher out of her bag. “I'd give you something for the pain, but that can wait. You need a lesson or two on not bloody well running off on me!” She started to say something else, but stopped as Professor McGonagall and others rushed onto the stairway. As McGonagall's group checked on Tonks and Lupin, she leaned in close and hissed at him, “Listen

up, Harry Potter, you're going to live long enough to be a father to these children; I will not be raising them alone. You're not getting out of it that easy. You don't get to die until I say so!"

Despite the pain, he managed a slight laugh and threw his undamaged arm around her.

-----

Albus knew he should feel more remorseful as the tears of his Phoenix dripped over Lupin's wounds. Initially, Madame Pomfrey had thought that both Remus and Nymphadora would not survive. Fortunately, due to their unusual constitutions, they were able to weather their grievous injuries that would have been mortal for ordinary humans. The good of their survival coupled with Harry's restored power and his own performance against Tom outweighed the other losses.

He cast a privacy spell, isolating this area from the other persons injured in the brawl earlier this evening. Addressing those still conscious, which consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Potter, "One thing has vexed me in the hours since I determined that the creature was a Revenant. How is it that you were able to see it Susan? The Aurors could not and it was only Mr. Lupin's heightened senses that allowed him a marginal perception of the creature."

Susan shrugged against his twinkling eyes, "Harry set it on fire. I couldn't see it, but I could see the flames. I aimed for the center."

He laughed, allowing a smile to cross his face. "Of course, that makes perfect sense. Otherwise, the only people that would have been able to see it would have had to share a blood link to Harry. The bond between the two of you would not have sufficed; if, however, Potter blood were present in your body, say through a placenta, then you'd have been able to see the Revenant as plain as day."

Susan was a horrible liar and her blush gave away far too much. "No, I was aiming at the center of the flames."

He sounded truly like a Headmaster casually humoring a student caught in a lie. "Of course you were, Mrs. Potter. Allow me to offer my sincerest congratulations."

Albus waved off both of their protests. For the first time in months, he felt content.

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Rita sat at her desk trying and failing to write a story that would pass her censor. It had been nearly four weeks since the attack on Diagon Alley where the Auror Auxiliary force with the "token assistance" of Albus Dumbledore had thwarted the "massive thrust" from the enemy forces.

Officially, that was the last reportable action undertaken by the Dark Forces. No one seems to mention the four recruiting stations that had been put to the torch. Scrimgeour finally had his Mobilization Act. Thumbing his nose at the Vatican Accords, the Minister had created a *de facto* army. Though in truth, it is more of an armed mob and less of a true army. Quietly swept under the rug was the large group of Auxiliaries who spent an hour or so "requisitioning" half the inventory inside Quality Quidditch Supplies especially the five Firebolts in the owner's inventory.

The various shopkeeper's complaints that the units now patrolling the Alley were forcing them to pay protection money or offer substantial "discounts" to the squads was an obvious no-no. Then there was that matter of the twenty recruits who were taken out on a training exercise and haven't been seen since. No, that's not "allowed" in any articles either.

She was used to gross distortions of the truth, but this was getting ridiculous. Instead of the handful of Aurors that had started the year at Hogwarts and the other, smaller schools, there was a full contingent stationed near each with a full time recruiter and propagandist there to spread the Scrimgeour gospel. Rita wistfully smiled at the impressive drivel she managed to churn out on how those recruiters are helping to heal the injuries at Hogwarts.

There certainly wasn't a lack of news, just a lack of news that she could actually write a story about. From the active topics board, she selected, "Ministry's Security Precautions Ensure a Festive Halloween for All" and began to rearrange the insipid press release. She'd need to find some idiot shopkeeper, obviously other than the ones moaning about the protection rackets and at least one or two fanatical Ministry officials, who she and a few of her other reporters had taken to calling "Scrimsuckers" or "Scrimblowers." It was that tiny bit of humor that made her job still tolerable.

Just another day, keeping her delicate derriere from getting further crushed under the thumb of oppression. She'd be a good girl and buy her war bonds and wear a charmed pin supporting the troops.

-----

The duo walked through the former Malfoy Manor, soon to be rechristened the Potter-Black mansion. A full team of Curse Breakers moved with deliberation through each room. Bill finished tracing a complicated series of runes and watched them fade into the wall and was satisfied with their placement. Looking rather tired, he turned and joined them.

"The grounds are done. We're layering wards from room to room. This will be the most heavily defended household in all of England. Only three more days of sixteen hour shifts, I'll be glad when it's over."

Charlie laughed. "I'm sure the money doesn't hurt either."

"No, but Emmeline's getting better..."

"The two of you getting serious again?" Narcissa listened to the banter of the brothers recalling Charlie's stories of how his brother and the Vance woman dated in school and then drifted apart.

Bill's demeanor changed. The normally cheerful smile disappeared. "One thing I've taken out of all this loss is to hold on to what you value and get what happiness you can out of life."

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Charlie said before he squeezed Narcissa’s hand. Bill nodded and made an excuse to leave.

“Does it feel strange to be back?” Charlie asked with a sympathetic tone.

“It’s just a place, Charles. In this house, I’ve entertained Heads of State, Diplomats, Quidditch Stars and the highest levels of society. I’ve also hosted parties of a different sort where it took hours to wash the blood off the walls. I’ve served tea to the Dark Lord and watched as artifacts were stored in our vaults. Part of me would rather see this place put to the torch.”

Charlie gave her a strange look. Narcissa knew that he accepted her unconditionally, but he would probably never truly, fully understand her.

“Have you given any more thought to my suggestion that we spend the winter holidays in New Zealand? We could leave right after the official Potter wedding. I can handle all the arrangements.”

Charlie uncomfortably answered. “I know what you’re thinking, but with everything that’s happened I need to be here this year. What’s left of my family needs me.”

She smiled watching a house-elf scrubbing the railings of the 15th century Italian marble staircase as they walked through the main entryway and into the ceremonial hall. She’d make the arrangements anyway. Charles would have to trust her judgment on this one.

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“Hello, Mother. Father asked me to stop by. Unfortunately, it seems that he will be working late, again, this evening.”

Molly instinctively stood to hug Percy, but stopped, recognizing the futility of attempting to hug a ghost. “It’s alright dear. I don’t feel much like celebrating this evening.” Arthur had been coping by working even more. Her life seemed so hollow now. She didn’t even feel like this place was a home. It wasn’t the Burrow. This was merely Aberforth Dumbledore’s house!

She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue, "When Arthur and I first moved here, I worried where we were going to fit everyone for the winter holidays. Now I worry that there will be too many empty rooms." Almost mechanically, her eyes wandered to the battered, but still functional Weasley family clock which had survived the destruction of the House of Black.

Percy attempted to reassure her, "Well I've noticed that with the lull in the fighting all the hands had moved back to normal. Ronald is in school. Father and William are at work, Charles' hand seems to move between 'work' and 'dating,' and Fredrick is, ahem, '*making mischief*.' They both looked at the hand for Penelope that stayed on 'missing.' A week ago, it had surprisingly moved to 'mortal peril,' staying there for an entire day before returning to its current position. There had been much speculation as to what had happened.

"Has there been any word on her location?"

"No, the last lead had her in Italy, but that turned out to be a Polish witch on vacation with her family. The Minister sadly informed me that for the duration of the war, he could no longer spare the resources to search for her. Though she is his goddaughter, locating her is not a national priority."

"No, I suppose it's not. Rounding up children and convincing them that they are an army is..."

"My new existence has given me a pragmatic outlook. Were I still flesh and blood, I would no doubt have been vehemently arguing all the positive merits of Mobilization and ignoring any potential flaws. With my new found clarity, I can only say that it is an ugly solution to an even uglier problem."

Seeing his mother's reluctance, Percy continued, "I saw the paperwork approving the exemptions for Bill, Charlie, Fred and Angelina. That was a nice gesture on your part."

Molly laughed dryly, "Not so much a gesture as insistence on Fred's part. I know he already has a ring for her. I'm just hoping he'll wait before he rushes into anything, but Angelina has been incredibly supportive of the family. It's the least I could do. I made the same



offer to George's Alicia, but she declined, saying that she would pay for her own."

They continued to make small talk, both voicing their subtle disapproval of the relationship between Charlie and Narcissa Black. Although, Percy admitted that he had very little room to talk. Molly felt like she was beginning to feel a bit better when the first shouts started.

"The festivities must be starting early. I really don't see the point in using fireworks until the sun has set." Molly said.

"I must confess that I'm surprised that the celebration has already started. People must be looking for a reason to let off ..." Percy was interrupted by the clock's sound. Both looked up to see which hand was moving with a feeling of anxiety.

The hand with Molly's picture on it moved from 'Home' to 'Mortal Peril.' Percy bolted through the wall and moments later reappeared through another wall.

"Mother, you must flee! There is an army approaching!" The wards Bill had placed on the house activated. The wards held up for less than a minute before they heard pounding on the outside windows and doors. She grabbed George's old broom and headed up the steps.

-----

Darius Longbottom circled lazily through the air on his broom, using another fire spell to keep steering the mass of Inferii towards the town of Hogsmeade. He smiled, watching the other broom riders working to keep the large formation moving. They were approaching from the south. The giants and trolls were following the train tracks in the east and the foreign vampires and rogue Veela clan were waiting for sunset at the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

The Ministry fighters were already engaged against the Trolls, Giants and the ten or so broom-mounted witches and wizards. The underbelly of the town was waiting to be slashed open and have its intestines spilt.

Lord Voldemort had stated his battle plan, in a show of force Hogsmeade was to be completely razed. No building is to be left standing and everything reduced to rubble. When the children at the castle looked out here in the morning light, they would see nothing.

The Inferii horde was already attacking houses with various undead creatures disintegrating against warded houses. He used his own spells to speed up the wards' failures. Some of the Death Eaters broke off and began erecting the wards against Portkeys and Apparition as Darius flew over the town, hurling spells at the people who were running through the streets. It was beautiful mayhem and it was only going to get better as the sun set.

From the second floor of a nearby house a window blew out and a plump red headed woman flew out, trying to escape. Deftly, his cutting curse struck like a scythe through the twigs on the rear of her broom causing her to spiral out of control and strike the ground outside of the house. He watched her struggle to her feet clutching a broken arm as the Inferii began to surround her. A ghost bolted from the house and attempted in vain to distract the walking dead as the witch lashed out against the zombies. Fire drove some back, but there were too many. He watched as she tried to Apparate and then clutch at a necklace, which also failed.

For a moment, he considered watching her bravely make her last stand against the lumbering soulless hulks ambling towards her. Then, he changed his mind and hit her with a disarming spell that sent her wand flying through the air. Last stands were terribly overrated and seldom lived up to they hype. He saw her frantically saying something to the ghost, perhaps giving her final messages of farewell.

Darius saw there was no further need to watch. Watching a person struggle against death might be entertaining. Watching them being eaten alive wasn't. Making a tight turn, he brought his broom towards the town looking for the next bit of human drama to catch his eye. Seeing none, he joined a group of Death Eaters moving to attack the rear of the Minister's troops. Hogsmeade would fall. They would level it and wait amongst its rubble for the counterattack. The Vampires

and the Veela would then join the fray and the slaughter would be complete.

War was a beautiful thing.

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## Chapter 39 – One Last Moment in the Setting Sun

*October 31st, 1996*

Peter stood as tall as he could. Facing him were a dozen centaurs stallions. In the background he could hear the dying wails of a giant. Neutralizing Grawp had been child's play – he wasn't able to resist the wild boar that had been bewitched to wander close to the entrance of Grawp's cave. Unfortunately for Grawp, the boar was so full of toxins that it was mostly dead before Grawp ever snatched it.

"Lord Voldemort offers this gift, a dead giant, to your people as a token of his respect for the centaur nation. As we have also said to the Merpeople, my lord has no interest in your territories and wishes you no ill-will."

The leader, identified as Bane, looked annoyed with Peter. "The herds are not interested in the dealings of wizards. We grow weary of doing your dirty work."

"My lord seeks no service from you. The giant fought against him and justice has found him. Unlike Dumbledore, we would never seek to use you to remove his spider problem."

A shout from the edge of the grotto attracted everyone's attention. "Bane, you cannot listen to this worm! His words are full of lies!"

Bane's expression hardened. "Ah, our traitor returns with more warnings and dire predictions. Tell me, Firenze, have you grown tired of trying to enlighten the wand-waving spawn? Have they made you into a gelding yet, to become the perfect man pet?"

Peter watched as the centaurs turned towards the new arrival. "The darkness edges forward seeking to eclipse everything. I sensed you needed my counsel."

Bane roared with a mocking laughter, "How soon you seem to forget that I too can read the stars. Yet my interpretation is that the coming slaughter is best left to our two-legged oppressors."

"I have come to prevent you from making a mistake." Firenze answered.

"Ah, but what you fail to realize is that it is my mistake to make, Firenze. What little support you had in the herds left when you turned your back on us. It is *you* who have made the mistake in returning. You are either 'of the herd' or you are not."

Firenze looked angry and reared on his hind legs. "I will always be 'of the herd.' I see there is nothing further for me to do here, so, I will go to make my case before the elders. They need to know that inaction is the path to doom for us all."

The renegade turned to leave when a dozen bows cocked in his direction. Firenze turned and looked at Bane, "Now, who is not 'of the herd?' Will you truly strike me down, going against all that we hold sacred?"

Bane held his hand to halt the archers and then cast a glance towards Peter as if waiting to see what the Animagus would do.

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

*The* deadly green energy washed over Firenze and the centaur fell lifeless to the ground.

Peter looked at the centaurs, which still had arrows at the ready, but had not yet pointed them at him. "Like the giant, he was an ally of Dumbledore and would only drag your people into the conflict. My lord wishes for your herds to flourish and take no sides in the battles to come."

Bane gestured to his warriors to lower their weapons, most complied. "He was my enemy, but he was also a centaur. Be gone from our woods, Wizard. I know of the creatures that are in the southern tip of the forest. Take them with you!"

"They will be gone by nightfall and shall not return." Peter bowed respectfully and turned to leave. He strained his ears, listening for the sounds of arrows, but was relieved to hear none. Reaching the end of the grotto, he Apparated back to his group of fighters. They'd been

given a crucial role in the battle and he was determined not to let his master down.

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Lord Voldemort chose not to ride into Hogsmeade on a broom; he'd always disliked them. Instead, like Hannibal crossing the Alps, he rode into the village on the back of a massive creature. His "elephant" was Hagrid's dead former pet, the three-headed dog previously known as "Fluffy." Hurling a bolt of magic, a burning house exploded into cursed shrapnel.

He trusted the source of his intelligence with his life. The same intelligence that said the Ministry's staging point would be to the west. As Scrimgeour's mob of an army cut its teeth on his undead in the ruins, his broom riders would strike as one instead of engaging in pointless individual duels, and then the Vampire would use the Veelas to beguile the male wizards in the right flank and hit them hard.

Meanwhile, all of Hogsmeade needed to burn, well, not all of Hogsmeade. Voldemort brought his mount to a halt and leapt down in front of the building. The battle was going according to plan, but he could not afford any mishaps. A few of the zombies started towards him, but he stepped past the ward line, admiring the workmanship that caused the husks to ignore this building completely. The owner opened the door. His eyes were glazed over from an obvious compulsion. Whoever had done so, wanted to make it obvious that this man was enthralled. There was a dead man seated in the chair next to the broadcast desk and rows filled with broadcast crystals and vinyl records.

"Who was that?" He asked the manager of the Hogsmeade Wizarding Wireless station.

"Tobias Poggins, my Ministry appointed censor."

"Who killed him?"

"You did, Master." The owner didn't sound terribly unhappy about the censor's fate.

Voldemort, almost handed him the crystal, but then saw a duplicate of the recording crystal already mounted on the wireless broadcaster. Apparently, it would have to wait.

“Is anyone else in the building?”

“My wife and child are in the bedroom upstairs.”

“Are they alive?”

“Yes, you put them into an enchanted sleep.”

“Very good. Continue with your tasks, servant.”

Lord Voldemort ascended the steps and withdrew a small box. His recent trip to America last week had netted him a most useful item. Minutes passed as he looked out the window to the west, searching the fields for the first signs of the anticipated Ministry army.

“Ah yes, right on time. How punctual of them.” He began to dictate using the Quick Quotes quill, noting the size and composition of the enemy force as they struggled to move the ill-trained mob into position. Within seconds, the fighting began. Time continued to march forward and he sensed something to the north. If that massive surge was what he suspected, there would be a great celebration tonight.

From the small box, he withdrew his newest acquisition, a time turner. There was only one person who he would trust with his life. He placed the time turner about his neck and began turning it backwards. There was much work to be done and he needed to send himself a few last minute adjustments to the plan.

Time was, indeed, on his side.

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Harry’s skin still itched where it had been burned in the fight with the Revenant. For a change, Susan didn’t have to drag him out to the feast. Though Halloween had been celebrated as a holy day amongst magical folks for centuries, it had taken on a new meaning after the events in 1981. Harry knew what a sad, delusional lie that was. It was

easily his least favorite holiday, but he felt better than he had in a long time. His strength had returned and ironically, as Flitwick predicted, the long spell of Revenant-induced weakness had helped him improve as a fighter.

"You're in a good mood." Hermione said coming up next to him.

Harry replied with mock severity, "Sorry, I'll try to be a bit angrier and brooding. Will that help?"

She shrugged flipping her hair over her shoulder, "Perhaps, but most would mistake it for your normal demeanor."

"You wound me with your wit. Are you looking forward to watching the fireworks from Hogsmeade this evening?"

"Most of Ravenclaw seems to be staying in their tower. I suppose it has just as good a view from there as it does from here. Where's Susan?"

"Not feeling well. It's starting to get difficult for her."

"Do you want me to stop by and see her? I can come by for a visit later."

"That'd be great! She's actually spending more time with you than I am these days. Where's Ron?"

"In a broom closet with Dean."

Harry looked stunned, "What?"

Hermione frowned for a minute before laughing, "They're actually *cleaning* the broom closet. Sorry, I just wanted to see the look on your face, rather juvenile of me I suppose, especially given the circumstances, but it was priceless. It's the broom closet right by the steps where Ginny ..."

Harry understood as her voice trailed off, both of his classmates were still working through their loss. "Dean's idea?"



“Actually, it was Ron’s. Dare I say it, but he’s becoming quite mature for his age.”

“Or like me, he’s getting better at hiding it.”

“Keep telling yourself that Harry. Someone might believe you.”

For a short time, they bantered casually back and forth. It was lighthearted, harkening back to the days before Voldemort’s resurrection, when times were less troubling. For a brief shining moment the two of them reclaimed a moment of their youth, both hoping it would last longer.

It lasted only as long as it took for someone to turn on the first wireless set in advance of the music that was to be played during the fireworks. Instead someone was speaking and Harry knew that voice all too well.

*...imagination. As I was saying, I want you, the people, to have a complete understanding of tonight’s actions and why I am doing this. Many people will die this evening and I regret this course of action, but one must never shy away from the hard decisions.*

*Tonight, I will erase Hogsmeade from the face of the planet. I look upon ‘the only all-magical’ settlement in England and what I see saddens me – ramshackle hovels, where magnificent houses should stand! I see no museums, no places with Masters tutoring their Apprentices, and nothing that gives me any sense that we are a people or a culture to be admired. It is a symbol of all that is wrong with this land and the backwards mindset of the people who govern it.*

*I could almost allow this affront to pass, were it not for the fact that your minister plans to make to turn Hogsmeade into an armed camp. I cannot allow this to occur and that is why this place shall be destroyed.*

*But wait, I suppose the Minister’s grand army will arrive to save the day? Surely they will thwart the Dark Lord? Another lesson for those hearing my voice, for it is not sheer numbers that can destroy me. They cannot legislate me out of existence. Scrimgeour and his toadies will be shown for the fools that they are. My followers, I ask*

*them to join. Your Minister passes a decree and demands that you join. Where is freedom in all this I ask you? When did your Ministry stop serving you and instead begin to command you?*

*So, I will fight this mob of an army and I shall win. I will fight them at Dumbledore's doorstep and in full-view of all the children at the castle, teaching them a valuable lesson. The children will know that the Minister cannot command the people to stop me. My power is unmatched and none shall stand against me. The children will know that people who volunteer to fight will fare much better than those forced to fight. Finally, they will look out from that bastion and see nothing left of Hogsmeade and know that their future under Scrimgeour is bleak, when his might army cannot protect his citizens.*

*Know this – I will strike down Rufus Scrimgeour, I will strike down Albus Dumbledore, and I will strike down Harry Potter for I am Lord Voldemort and tonight, my will is law!*

Once again, the school alarms rang, instructing the students to return to their dorms. Harry started looking for Dumbledore.

-----

Lord Voldemort worked his way through the tasks before him. The wife and child were put to sleep. The Ministry toady was eliminated. The broadcaster bewitched and handed the recording crystal to be played at the designated time. He started to erect the wards that would divert the undead, and then he remembered to send himself the owl.

Briefly, he considered the possibility of placing the station under the Fidelius charm, but such a piece of magic was not meant for a public building. It might cause people to forget where the station was on their wireless dial. After a time, it became one of those ideas that just became too cumbersome to place into action. There was no doubt that Scrimgeour would order this transmitter destroyed. It will be the only building left in Hogsmeade after all.

Lord Voldemort finished his mundane work ahead of schedule. It was time to summon the Dementors. They had been a disappointment, rather fearful to take the field after Potter had found a way to destroy

them *en masse*. The upside of the current Dementor situation was that they were *very good* at kissing Muggles and returning with their bodies.

He Apparated to the warehouse, surprising Peter.

“Master, did you not just summon us to our new base?”

“Indeed I did. I require something I have stored here. Unless you hurry, you will find that I am there when you arrive and I will be most displeased.” He walked past Peter, rather amused. Now he knew why his servant had appeared rather nervous at the beginning of the briefing. He had apparently played a small, but rather amusing joke on himself.

He entered the laboratory and located the spinning crystal; it was a testament to Madame Edgecombe’s inventiveness and tireless work ethic. After months, she had recreated the central controlling crystal to the Floo Network, albeit with a few minor modifications. While the battle in Hogsmeade would indeed be a monumental blow to the Scrimgeour administration, losing control over the Floo Network would prove equally devastating. Madame Edgecombe had unsuccessfully lobbied for years to create a backup crystal. The administration in power had always deemed the expense too costly. Now, having destroyed their crystal, it would take several months to create another. Thus, Scrimgeour will either shut down the Floo network and impede all commerce, or be forced to cede control of it to Voldemort. That reminded him; the Knight Bus needed to be destroyed. Either way, the Minister loses.

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Five minutes after Voldemort’s address had begun repeating, most every capable fighter in Hogwarts assembled at the Auror station near the Great Hall.

Harry looked over the group as Dumbledore addressed the group. “Minerva, I leave Hogwarts in your hands. It does not appear that he will be testing our defenses, but rather making a statement in Hogsmeade.”

The leader of the Auror detachment reiterated that their responsibility was to defend the castle and that the forces stationed in Hogsmeade are already engaged with the forces being massed for a counter attack.

The Headmaster's eyes came to rest on Harry. It looked like he was about to protest, but then he stopped. Harry knew he was ready. Dumbledore knew it as well, so the hypocritical argument never materialized. Tonks, however, was headed towards him with a scolding look in her eye. He wasn't out of the woods yet! Between the Order members and the staff, there were fifteen wands coming going to Hogsmeade and an equal number here for the defense of the castle.

"Harry! What do you think you're doing?"

"Going to fight. Are you coming?"

"I don't think this is a good idea. It could be a trap."

"No, it's a battlefield. People are fighting and dying. I'm a powerful wizard and I can help."

Tonks shrugged. "I'll get our brooms. You get to explain it to your wife, assuming we both get back."

Harry watched as Minerva turned away a group of students who had come to offer to fight. Harry slid behind a pair of Order members, not wanting to provide fuel for their argument. Oddly, he found himself face to face with Peter Abbott.

"What are you doing, Potter?"

"I'm staying out of sight, while McGonagall sends those students away."

"What makes you think that you're ready for something like this?"

The other Order member with Abbott, who, Harry recalled, was named Torkelson, scoffed. "Give it a rest, Peter. I've dueled against both you and Potter. You know I'm better than you and I've dueled

against Harry here and he wipes the floor with me every time, sometimes I even had help. Harry, I feel better knowing you're with us."

Harry thanked the man and saw that between McGonagall and Vector, the student volunteers had been dealt with. The less time he spent around Abbott, the healthier Abbott would remain. Somehow, he knew that even if he killed Voldemort right now, there would still be people who treated him this way. It seemed unavoidable. Fortunately, most of the people whose opinions mattered to him had reached a consensus that Harry could take care of himself.

He checked the vials of potions clipped to his bracer. Hermione had given him something to try for her. On the bracer was something that looked like a six-sided die, but it would grow to the size of Dudley's old cube puzzle game that Dudley would always have to take apart and put back together to show Aunt Petunia how "brilliant" he was. It was the runic equivalent of a hand grenade and apparently was what the sixth and seventh year NEWT students in Runes were crafting. Maybe it was the strangeness of the situation, but Harry almost pictured a factory with students carving away for the war time effort like those old documentaries Vernon used to watch on the BBC. Moving next to Flitwick, he spotted that his professor sported three of the tiny cubes on his left bracer.

"Stick close to me Harry, in case we run into public enemy number one. If you can lock wands with him, do it? Neutralizing him within the battle is just as good as a victory."

"What about Dumbledore? Shouldn't we stay close to him?"

"If possible, yes, but Albus tends to freelance far too much in battle. Take it from someone who has fought beside him before, he has a style of fighting that is ill-suited for group tactics."

Tonks returned with their brooms and they waited as the last minute instructions were given. Several of the people including Harry felt a tingle of power, almost like a shiver passing through the room. Someone was wielding powerful magic out there and no one really wanted to guess who it was. Dumbledore stared down at the map on the Aurors desk.

“Harry, Filius – I want you to lead our broom riders into Hogsmeade over the lake. There are reports of a substantial number of Inferii in the village and giants are there as well. Tom and some of his minions are fighting a group of Ministry people at the edge of the castle’s wards. I will detain him. Rescue as many people as you possibly can and inflict what casualties you can on his forces. Leave the pitched battles to the Ministry’s militia.”

Fawkes swooped in and trilled hovering before the old man. A second later, they disappeared and Flitwick took over giving instructions with his childlike voice.

Within a minute all fifteen of them were airborne and flying over the lake in a v-shaped formation. Smoke and explosions could be seen in the distance along with tiny flashes of light indicating aerial battles. Harry’s pulse quickened as he fought the urge to push the Firebolt faster. In less than a minute, he’d be fighting in a war.

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Dumbledore reappeared in a flash with Fawkes hovering above him. He had paused by the battlements to drink the Polyjuice, assuming Harry’s form. It would not be nearly as disconcerting for his opponent as it had been last time, but having two arms and a fully functioning respiratory system were well worth the trade-off. When he finished transforming, he again signaled his familiar, who transported him into the fray.

There were perhaps two dozen combatants. He ignored the flurry of low level spells around him. The cloaked figure waiting for him commanded his attention. The longer Tom was delayed here meant the greater the chances for turning the tide in Hogsmeade.

“Hello again, Tom,” he whispered, allowing his voice to be magically carried to his opponent, who did not reply. “Time to resume our game, don’t you not agree?”

The hooded man tapped an object sitting on a rock and a wave of power emanated from it and all fighting suddenly ceased. It was a ruse!

Dumbledore looked around warily as twenty-plus wands turned on him. The hood was thrown back, revealing Peter Pettigrew. “The master said you would walk into this trap like a fool. I should have never doubted him. *Avada Kedavra!*”

Killing curses and other lethal spells came from all angles. Dumbledore dived to the ground, raising a stone barrier on his left side and sending a raw wave of energy against those on his right. It sent eight of them sprawling as the curses shattered the earthworks he had created. Fawkes circled overhead, but a continuous stream of curses from six minions kept his familiar above, just out of reach. He sent a seismic wave through the ground itself as a cutting curse lashed his side. Three explosive curses destroyed the final vestiges of his barrier.

Working his spells as fast as he could, he conjured, transfigured and animated with a rush of magical energy, but there were too many. Bludgeoners savaged him, while cutting curses ripped at his flesh. His wand was knocked from his hand. Reaching his hand up to Fawkes, he hoped his companion would find a way to him as green light filled his vision. He cursed himself for a fool as the energy enveloped him.

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“Victory!” Peter shouted. The trap had worked! He would forever be known as the man who led the attack that killed Albus Dumbledore! All those around him, whether in Death Eater garb or not, cheered the carcass in front of them.

A sound interrupted their celebration, forcing Peter to look up. Above them, circled the firebird and he recalled his Care of Magical Creatures training, bracing himself for the Phoenix Song that would evoke feelings of terror. What he heard was both surprising and equally as terrifying.

It was not the lament of a creature mourning the passing of its master. It was the angry war cry of a monster unleashed and the sound shook him to his core. The bird disappeared momentarily only to reappear in front of one of the men in Ministry garb to his left. He barely had time to scream as burning claws ripped his flesh and the beak shattered

his skull. The Phoenix disappeared as spells ripped through the empty air, destroying the falling body.

People started firing spells blindly as the monster came after them. Several broke and ran. One idiot ran towards the castle and was disintegrated by the fully operational wards protecting the school. Others tried to get into the forest only to be turned into burning pillars of flesh as the creature unleashed its full wrath on them. Peter cursed the wards they had set up to prevent Dumbledore from escaping, for they were now stuck in the same situation.

Almost half were dead already. It would get them all if Peter didn't do something - fast. "Backs together! Form a line! Quickly! It's our only hope! Keep it at bay and we'll destroy the ward stones."

The remainder struggled to comply. Peter was counting on the man at his back to protect him as he shot spells at the Phoenix. For a moment, he wondered if his Animagus form would be fast enough to make it to the forest. No! He would not lose his command. Lord Voldemort had demanded that Dumbledore's body be brought to him and Peter would not fail!

So it was that the ten remaining Death Eaters clustered together casting spells at the elusive monster. It let off a frightening shriek that Peter imagined was what a banshee would sound like and disappeared.

"Quickly destroy the ward stones and we can Portkey out. You grab Dumbledore's body. Hurry what are you waiting..."

Peter never finished the sentence as a blinding light washed over them. It was like a miniature sun had appeared above them, descending rapidly. He thrust his wand skyward firing spells at that which he could not see as the fireball encompassed the area.

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Stories would be told that Albus Dumbledore sacrificed himself in a blazing release of magic that left a fifty foot wide crater of blackened earth where nothing would grow. It was a bleak and barren monument, save for a small silver stain near the epicenter. His allies



would praise his nobility and his enemies would be glad that such terrible power no longer faced them.

The stories would, of course, be wrong. Lord Voldemort was a well-read person. He knew many legends that had been thought lost to time. When he felt that detonation in Hogsmeade, he knew that one of these legends had turned out to be true after all. Most considered the Phoenix a symbol of goodness and purity, however there were several theories that the creature is an avatar of chaos and destruction. Those who subscribed to it speculated that the dangerous creatures were anchored to Wizards or Witches of a peaceful nature by the powers above lest the whole world burn from their fury.

Lord Voldemort had originally planned to be there, mocking Dumbledore as the door slammed shut on his trap. The magic he sensed prior to using the time turner was enough to send Peter in his stead. He hoped Peter would survive, the rest were new recruits or a group of Scrimgeour's Army placed under the Imperious curse.

*In the final analysis, trading Peter and twenty assorted nobodies for Albus Dumbledore was a net victory. Much like this is a victory.*

Lord Voldemort stood disillusioned at the door of an office in one of the buildings adjacent to the Ministry building. It was still a few hours in the past and Dumbledore still lived. The office was called the Nexus. It was the central hub of the Floo network. Four people stood inside the intricate runic lattice that comprised the "brains" of the Floo Network. Using complex spells, the Arithmancers managed the pathways to optimize traffic flow. That left only the receptionist and the one additional person – probably a Floo installer in the room.

His discussions with the Dementors were successful. They were on their way to join in the battle. Unlike the carnage, which would soon be starting in Hogsmeade, Lord Voldemort had no intention of causing these people lasting harm. They were highly trained professionals, of the type that you did not just replace. Destructive spells were also frowned upon, if he wanted the complex runework to remain intact.

What he intended to do brought back brazen memories of his impetuous youth, of days when he was not as certain of his power. Casting a bubblehead charm, he uncorked the sleeping vapors and connected the tubing into the bellows. A vanishing spell created a tiny hole in the wall which he attached the charmed bellows to with a sticking charm.

It would blow the vapors into the room and put them all to sleep. He repeated this twice more to ensure that it wouldn't be very long at all and waited patiently.

Five minutes later, he walked into the room stunning the still barely awake receptionist. Using the spells Madame Edgecombe had prepared him with, he crossed into the runic area and approached the central crystal. It was a priceless gem of flawless quality.

Examining the base, he pressed the runes in sequence to stop the gems spinning and place the Floo system into a maintenance mode. Once per month the system was shut down for a brief period so that the gem could be meticulously cleaned – or in this case, replaced.

He purposefully had Madame Edgecombe use a different gem. When the next shift arrived, or his victims awoke, they would realize that the network was compromised. That's when the fun would begin. Prying open one of the Arithmancer's eyes, he peered into the man's unconscious mind. Legilimency took even less time when the subject was unconscious. He now had the Floo Address he was looking for – Scrimgeour's emergency bunker.

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Those same thoughts of Uncle Vernon's World War II documentaries dominated Harry's mind as the airborne combat began in earnest. Below them, the village was inundated with undead, giants, trolls circling around like sharks in the water waiting for the fliers to come crashing down.

He pushed his Firebolt into a dive as the first volley of curses came towards him. Their formation broke. Tonks and Flitwick both went higher and Harry realized his mistake. This wasn't Quidditch. Air

superiority was fought from higher position, as several Death Eaters above him tried to rain spells down on him.

Harry accelerated. This was a Firebolt after all and he was at his best on a broom. Threading the alleyway between two burning buildings and over the outstretched hands of some of the milling undead Harry was already climbing as he exited at a speed threatening to throw him from the broom. Marshalling his energy, he cut loose with wedge stunner that knocked two Death Eaters from their brooms and spiraled left, landing a blinding curse on a Troll below. It would make the creature as dangerous to the undead as it did anyone else on the ground. Pulling hard over, he dodged two spells aimed for where he would have been. A tingling sensation washed over his back, and his cloak ripped flapping in the wind, but the dragon hide armor beneath stopped the cutting curse.

The Death Eaters were doing their best to knock people from their brooms or damage the brooms altogether. Harry responded with a vortex of wind that buffeted several of them off course. Spotting a falling comrade, he cast a cushioning charm as someone else slowed Sinistra's descent. She bounced off the now sponge-like surface and immediately began firing a slew of curses at the undead shambling towards her.

Harry closed the distance as a giant was bounding towards his former professor. Harry animated a burning tree and caused it to grapple with the giant slowing it as he pulled over next to her.

She needed no encouragement to leap onto the back of his broom. He heard her apply a sticking charm. "Concentrate on flying. I'll do the fighting!" she spoke in his ear.

Allowing her to be his "gunner," he swerved through the air focusing on his fighting while listening to the steady stream of spells coming from his former teacher. He made a run on a giant and used his wand to send a conjured spear into the creatures shoulder as Sinistra hit it with a barrage of cutting curses and blasters. The lumbering brute staggered, but did not fall.

"Hang on!" he shouted swerving out of the path of the club and feeling her one arm's grip around him tighten. He circled around

hearing her shield against something. “I heard a rumor that you used to play Quidditch. What position?”

She answered, “Chaser!”

“Think you could get Fi-Fi-Fo-Fum in the kissers with a runic bomb?”

“I’ll do my best.”

He detached the device from his bracer and allowed it to grow before handing it to his passenger. Circling around, he pelted it with ice shards causing the giant to howl in pain as Sinistra released. She was trying to get it into the mouth, but it ended up detonating on the creature’s misshapen teeth. The roaring pain intensified as much of its lower jaw disintegrated into a bloody mess and it fell to the ground badly injured. Harry was forced into a stomach churning turn to avoid a chunk of masonry hurled by the injured giant’s angry cohorts.

They continued swerving in and out of combat. It was difficult to tell who was winning. Unlike those movies Dudley used to watch, there was no way other than looking to tell who was friend or foe. Harry had no doubt that some people would fall to friendly fire.

Harry swung onto the tail of a Death Eater broom rider. His passenger immediately began cursing as the Death Eater tried to outmaneuver Harry. On a lesser broom, Harry likely would not have been able to stay on his target with a passenger, but the Firebolt again proved its worth as a Reductor curse shattered the broom’s twigs and sent the enemy rider hurtling to the ground.

He started to congratulate her when a massive explosion buffeted the entire town. A wave of magical energy tore through the earth and sky. The rail station building collapsed in a spray of debris and a giant wave could be seen moving across the lake... People and undead alike were tossed around like children’s dolls. Many of the riders were knocked out of the air. For his part, Harry fought for control of the broom as it spiraled out of control. From behind, Sinistra groaned and her grip slackened on him, as she slumped forward.

Her sudden shifting weight caused Harry lose what little control he had left of his speeding broom. The Firebolt slowed only slightly, as

they hit the ground hard a few hundred meters from the outskirts of town. There was a column of black smoke rising from somewhere near the edge of Hogwarts and the Forbidden Forest.

Shaking free of the stunning effect of the impact, Harry crawled forward and turned around. Professor Sinistra lay in a crumpled heap. Her legs still magically affixed to his broom. He moved to her side and saw the horrible wound on her back side. Someone had hit her with an awful cutting curse. He quickly closed the gash, but noticed the blood was no longer flowing and merely oozing. Casting a diagnostic spell, he saw she had no pulse.

He dug through her potions pack for anything that would help. Pulling a pair of blood replenishers, Harry forced them down her throat. He cast one enervate and was about to cast a second one when he was forced to dive out of the way of a killing curse.

Spinning there was broom rider landing. He wasn't masked, but he was wearing a Death Eater Cloak. The field had a few Inferii roaming, but none were an immediate threat.

"Hello, Potter. This is a pleasant surprise. I've been looking forward to this." The man walked with a swagger. He looked familiar, but Harry couldn't place him.

"Who are you?" Harry asked, stepping away from Sinistra's body and hoping that he'd done enough to save her. Fighting around her would only lead to certain doom.

"Oh I'm wounded? Of course, you don't recognize me, Darius Longbottom at your service."

Putting the pieces together, Harry fumed, "So, that was your plan all along, stealing someone's body?"

The ex-Vampire shrugged his shoulders, "Actually, this is more of a recent turn of events. Neville would have worked just as well, but I had to do with Frank's body. Is this a good look for me?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. Both kept their wands trained on each other, waiting for the other to make a move.

Darius continued, "The last times we've faced each other, you've had me at a considerable disadvantage. Now let's see whether all this training has done you any good." Darius led with a wave of power. Rather than block, Harry charmed his shoes and leapt over it, firing wildly with a pair of blasting curses

Landing in a crouch, he dived left out of the path of a bonebreaker. Harry took advantage of the grain field he was in to discreetly conjure a snake and command it to attack, a Confundus charm narrowly missed, but the follow on banisher, struck Harry in the arm spinning him backwards and spoiling Harry's cutter.

Neither put much effort into shielding themselves. This was a purely offensive duel. A portion of the wheat around Harry started turning into tentacles forcing Harry to perform a magical leap again. The second wave of power released by Darius struck him in mid-air flinging him ten feet higher.

Harry came down hard on his left ankle and felt a jolt of pain surge up through his leg. With his left hand, he snatched the vial filled with darkness powder and smashed it on the ground while sending a wind gust behind it.

Still inside the boundaries of the Anti-Apparition wards, neither could use that to their advantage. The cloud drifted between the two obscuring their vision. Darius sent several spells ripping through it and his own vortex of air. Harry kept low to the ground and magically repaired his ankle. It wasn't anywhere near Pomfrey's league, but he could use it again and that was what mattered. Another patch of wheat near him began to transform. No risky jump for him this time.

*"Magia Fluctus!"* Trying not to bellow the spell, Harry sent his own wall of moving force through field and the cloud. Tentacle-like grain was ripped from the ground and tossed through the air as the cloud of darkness dispersed. Harry quickly conjured two more snakes hoping that they would blend in with all the chaos.

In reply an Inferius was banished in Harry's direction and an engorgement spell cast on the husk. Harry was suddenly faced with a ten foot tall thing coming at him. Dodging additional spell fire from his

enemy, Harry attacked it with a fire whip severing one of the legs. Darius summoned the body of Sinistra still attached to his broom.

"I see your taste in females is improving, Potter. Care to trade this one for your wand?"

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"How very disappointing," Lord Voldemort muttered with obvious disdain in his voice. He had burst through the Floo hoping to find Scrimgeour's command bunker. Instead, he found a bolt hole. Three bodies littered the floor. There hadn't been time to sort out who they were, so without much thought he'd struck them down in a barrage of spells.

It had been Scrimgeour's wife and her two bodyguards. He instantly regretted killing her. She could have made a most useful thrall or hostage. At least he can take the body and pretend that she is his hostage.

*What the minister doesn't know won't hurt him. Well actually, it just might.*

There was a charm on her wedding band preventing him from removing it. He settled for simply removing the entire finger and left it magically floating in the center of the room. Quickly transfiguring her carcass into something more manageable, in this case a large bone, he floated in towards the fireplace while carving a detonation rune into the table and dumping one of the bodies on top of it. It would leave a nasty surprise for the person moving the body.

He was stymied at the Floo. It appeared to require a password or passphrase to activate. It was not surprising that the Floo at the Nexus bypassed the entry password requirement. It was a feature of his 'new controlling crystal.' People would still be prompted for a password to enter a 'protected' Floo, but it actually provided no protection at all. He had praised Madame Edgecombe at the time, but now realized that the praise was not entirely warranted, because the exit password remained in effect. A quick check showed he could neither Apparate nor make a Portkey. Sighing, he tried the door and

found it sealed. Again, this added to his frustration and he allowed his impatience to get the best of him.

Seconds later there was merely an empty gap where the door had been. Unfortunately, this triggered the outlying wards.

The full irony of the situation struck him as he lashed out at the wards. The time turner hung impotently around his neck. It could take a person three hours into the past, but then remained useless for nine hours after use. His forces in Hogsmeade would suffer needless casualties without him there.

The Dark Lord seethed in anger. He wanted to rejoin his troops in battle, but now, he was forced to fight his way out of the bolt hole. He cursed his luck and raged against the defenses from the inside out. Defeating the wards would take time that he didn't have. Time was no longer on his side. Time openly mocked Lord Voldemort.

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Harry knew Professor Sinistra was likely dead, still he tried to buy some time. He switched to stunners.

"Oh Harry, showing a bit of weakness are you." Instead of dodging, he simply used the floating teacher to shield him. After the second hit he chided Harry, "Oh my, a few more of these and her heart will surely stop. She's looking rather pale as it is. Perhaps you should surrender? Arrgghhh!"

One of Harry's snakes must have finally found its target. They were venomous, but since it was magical it could be countered by either a bezoar or a simple disenchantment. Harry's banisher flung his teacher away from him as Harry charged closing the distance. He felt a renewed surge of energy at the same time he felt the sinking feeling in his stomach. The remaining Dementors had arrived. He could sense them to the East.

With the Dementors, there was an additional well of energy that Harry could draw from. "*Attreo Glacis!*" A swarm of ice shards larger than he had ever produced emanated from his wand. Longbottom had



finished vanishing the snake and dived out of the way of the frozen daggers.

Longbottom responded by transfiguring a pair of rocks into wolves, but Harry decimated them with another ice storm. The Death Eater conjured the first shield blocking a pair of blasting curses, but the power behind them forced him backwards.

Sensing the tide had turned, Harry saw Longbottom summoning a broom, intending to escape. Refusing to let that happen, Harry cast his own summoning charm and the broom halted in midair before snapping under the strain of the magical tug of war. Both combatants stumbled backwards. Regaining their footing, each of them cast their own killing curse, with neither scoring a hit.

Bludgeoners, cutters, and bonebreakers were exchanged like jabs from boxers, each looking for an opening. Harry took a grim satisfaction in realizing that Darius was tiring. He needed to stay smart and he'd wear the man down, unless he could come up with something that Longbottom couldn't block or dodge.

Inspiration struck him like a bludgeoner. He called forth his corporeal Patronus. He had the energy to spare, but he didn't send it racing off to the east after the Dementors. Instead, he sent it right at Longbottom. Momentarily, Harry's opponent seemed to scoff at him, but Harry could visibly see him remembering something very important as the Death Eater attacked the solid Patronus. Harry could feel himself weakening with every spell that hit his construct, but he poured more energy into it, using his magic to keep it together and racing towards the Wizard.

Longbottom's killing curse struck the stag and Harry felt like someone had whacked him in the gut with a cricket bat and sank to the ground, but Prongs continued through it and trampled Darius Longbottom.

Harry rose to his feet as the Patronus continued its brutal assault. Dodging around some of the still animated plants, Harry came closer and commanded Prongs to stop.

Darius was a bloody mess, but still alive. His wand was broken into pieces and even if it was still intact it was doubtful that either of Longbottom's arms could lift them. "Go ahead, Potter. Finish me off!"

"This time, stay dead!" Harry's blasting curses ripped into the dying man. It wasn't like killing Snape. The madness wasn't there this time. He simply used three curses to make certain that Darius Longbottom was good and dead. His only regret is that he let Coedus the Vampire survive the first time. Maybe Neville could rest in piece now.

Pausing for only a scant minute, Harry made sure the deed was done. A diagnostic spell confirmed that Coedus was gone.

His victory was bittersweet as he again checked his Astronomy teacher only to find that she too was dead. Longbottom's body deserved to be zombie food, but she was a hero. He canceled the enchantments that kept her attached to his Firebolt and levitated her onto the back of his Patronus. The stag immediately started towards the castle.

Harry scooped his broom up into his hand. His left hand looked pale and white, almost skeletal. A pang of fear coursed through him. Was he turning? Mounting his broom, Harry had only one thought on his mind, those Dementors needed to be destroyed.

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From the battlements of Hogwarts two eyes scanned the darkening battlefield through a pair of Omnioculars. Every now and then, Narcissa Black's eyes would drift down to a piece of red silk tied to her wrist. As long as the silk remained red, Charles was still alive. She had asked him not to go, but he insisted, saying that his parents were in the town. Being pregnant, she did not even consider going and offered no resistance to his demand that she stay at the castle.

She hadn't anticipated this and that shamed her. She prided herself on not being caught with her guard down. Witnessing the savage fury of Dumbledore's phoenix, Narcissa dived behind the stonework for protection as the detonation shattered all the unbreakable windows on the green houses and sent a tremor through the castle. Though

the fighter hadn't resembled Dumbledore, she could only assume that he had died.

This complicated things. Would it alter the final outcome she envisioned? Does the plan require adjustments? She fought the tingle of panic by assessing the numbers. In hindsight, the attack made sense from the Dark Lord's point of view. The Ministry's forces were raw, untrained and had no real discipline. They wouldn't be that way forever. She conceded the rationale for the attack while her magical vision swept to where the east of the town. The militia struggled with the undead in the village, Dementors from the south, Dark Wizards circling above them and what looked like Vampires and Veela harassing northern flank.

Scrimgeour's "army" was getting humbling experience. They easily had the numbers, but no organization, but Voldemort gambled on delivering a crushing blow and breaking the people's spirit with a massive and symbolic body count. Too many of those "soldiers" out there were youngsters and the true victor of the battle will be the one who convinces the mothers, fathers, and relatives of those that are dead and dying who was to blame. Narcissa gave the edge to Scrimgeour. The Minister had his foot firmly on the throat of the press right now. Voldemort will have to try to get people rioting in the streets.

She looked at an animal approaching the front gates with a body draped on its back. Instinctively, she knew it to be a magical creature. Breathing a sigh of relief, Narcissa knew that Harry Potter was still out there fighting. The plan remained viable. Hope still remained for the "light" side. The ethereal stag faded from view and the body dropped to the ground as figures rushed out of the castle in a frenzied state. Narcissa didn't waste anymore time trying to figure out who that unfortunate soul was. If they were important, she'd know soon enough and if they weren't, it was pointless to wallow in the gory details any more than was required.

Moving the Omnioculars back towards the battle, her grim look was replaced with a more predatory look. The Dark Forces were scattering as the Southern flank of Dementors abruptly began to collapse. It took only moments for her to locate the source of the disruption. A group of five fast broom riders darted from the ruins of

Hogsmeade, one sending a gigantic stag Patronus thundering through the fleeing Dementors and her heart leapt upon seeing a misty looking dragon shaped Patronus. Charles, his brother and two others were protecting Harry as he obliterated the foul vermin. She caught her breath as a group of Veela hurled a volley of fireballs towards the group.

A massive burst of wind scattered the flaming spheres as Harry Potter turned his wrath on the remaining Vampires and Veelas. The Dark Wizards were already fleeing. Narcissa idly wondered if those remaining realized that they had been “volunteered” for a hopeless rearguard action.

The fighting was dying down. Within ten minutes, there would only be the horror of the aftermath. All of Hogsmeade lay in ruins, but she knew that it wasn't the end – only the beginning of the end. Nervously, she wondered who would stand when all was done.

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## Chapter 40 – It's Always Darkest

*October 31st, 1996*

"I'm so happy you're safe." Susan whispered in his ear as she slid her arms about him.

Susan had been through the emotional wringer from the moment she realized Harry was out there in the fighting. First she was hurt that he hadn't come to tell her he was going. Then, worry and concern replaced anger as she was torn between going to watch from the battlements and hiding inside her room, where she knew that he would want her to be.

In the end, she had waited in her room, concentrating on the weak thread of magic that connected them. As long as that thread existed, she knew that he was still alive. Early on in their relationship the link was new and awkward; the empathic nature of it had affected both of them. Now, the link was just so much background noise. She dreaded what would happen to her if the day came when she checked and the link wasn't there.

She knew she had every right to be angry with him, that he had again run headlong into battle, again, but she was smarter than that and knew it served no real purpose. Instead, when an equally exhausted Charlie Weasley delivered him to her door she simply propped him up and enveloped him as much as she could. He was filthy and smelled awful, but she couldn't care less.

Harry response was best described as garbled, but she didn't need to understand the words to know what he was saying.

Harry pulled his head back from her shoulder and looked at the former Dragon Handler. "Thanks Charlie."

"Anytime mate," Charlie replied.

Susan watched the fellow red head turn to leave.

"Charlie?" Harry asked. Charlie turned to face him again.

“I’m sorry about your mum. Let me know as soon as you hear something about your father.”

“I’ll do that,” Charlie said, putting one hand on the doorframe for support. “Percy said he was at the Ministry. Bill’s trying the Floo, but it must be overwhelmed. I’m going to go find him and see if he’s found out anything. Get some rest, Harry. Susan, make sure he does.”

Watching Charlie leave, Susan realized that the Weasleys were fast becoming this war’s version of the Potter, Bones, or McKinnon families from the first war – either gone or all but gone.

She helped him out of his dragon hide while noting the obvious, visible damage to the armored vest. It shocked her to think what would have happened had he not been wearing it. She started a bath for him and had their elf clear away his clothes and see if someone could repair his armor.

He held his left hand up for her inspection. It looked gaunt and slightly shriveled. The skin and the coloration wouldn’t have looked out of place on a man in his seventies, but on a young man it was cause for concern. Could Harry be starting to turn into a Dementor?

Tired green eyes met hers. They searched for any horrific reaction. She gave him none. “I just destroyed some more of them, but there are still some left. I’m thinking I’ll wear a glove on that hand. I’ll be just like Michael Jackson.”

“Who?”

Harry looked at his hand with mild disgust. “A black Muggle musician; last I heard he’s turning into an old, white man too. Sorry, bad joke.”

She rolled her eyes, making a mental note to ask Hermione to explain the joke and directed him into the tub as she removed her clothes. The glamours hiding the slight bulge in her stomach were bound to her clothes. Removing the glamours made her self conscious, but it was worth the smile on Harry’s face – the first one she had seen there since he had staggered back in.

She settled in behind him and began washing his back. He smelled of death. Susan needed to remove that stench. "I'm probably going to fall asleep on you." Harry cautioned.

"I don't mind. Do you want a dose of Dreamless Sleep?"

"I can't. The Minister might show up. McGonagall said she'll send someone for me if he does."

Susan responded, not catching the full implications of the statement. "Let Dumbledore handle it, unless, he's injured again."

"That's not going to happen, Susan; he's gone."

"You mean gone like dead?"

"Yeah." There was finality in his voice. Somehow that one word seemed to sum up the problem. The great hero was gone. She should feel sad, but instead she was numb again. Without him, who would the Wizarding world turn to? Susan knew the answer – her sixteen year old husband. It was bloody unfair!

"Did he fight Riddle?"

"Maybe, but I don't think so. I can still sense him out there. There were rumors that he was in Hogsmeade, but I never saw him."

"Did anyone else die that I know?" She was afraid to ask.

"Professors Sinistra and Thompson." Susan stopped sponging his back. She had always liked the Astronomy teacher as well as the man that taught her Ancient Runes course. "Most of the rest I couldn't tell, but I didn't see Hannah's dad or Mr. Torkelson once the fighting started. I couldn't give a shit about Abbott, but I know you still like him. Tonks is with Remus in the infirmary. She's not too bad, but he's banged up again."

Susan summoned Trixie and asked her to be discreet and find out if Peter Abbott was still alive.

Not knowing what else to say she said, "Do you want to talk about it?"

“No.”

“I understand. We can just sit here in silence.”

Harry shook his head slightly. “No, just talk to me – about anything other than this bloody war.”

And so she talked; ten minutes into her story about her first bit of accidental magic as a child realized he was asleep. She kept talking anyway.

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All Rufus Scrimgeour wanted to do was search for his wife. She was a special woman, who kept him going through the bad times and cheered him the loudest during the good times. His position as Minister of Magic denied him that luxury. All wands were needed elsewhere, his included. He assigned one of his bodyguards the task of searching for any leads into her abduction. Already, Rufus knew she would never be coming back to him.

He should be back in Hogsmeade, rallying the troops and making certain that he was “seen” as being in charge and proclaiming a victory, albeit a costly one over the wireless. Instead, he is staring at a gem rotating in the middle of a lattice of magic and listening to an Arithmancer explain that this gem is the “brains” of the Floo network.

The only problem is that it isn't the same “brain” that was there this morning. The Dark Lord could have used the same type of gem, but he didn't. He wanted Scrimgeour to know that the Floo Network was compromised.

“What do we do, sir?”

“How long until a suitable replacement can be constructed?” he asked the man.

“At least two months. We could contact other governments and see if they would be willing to provide us a replacement gem, but because of the expense, most do not keep a spare. First we must locate a suitable replacement gem and then...”



The Minister had no time for this.

“Shut it down,” Scrimgeour said wearily.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes, from what you are saying, we have no control over the Floo Network. It is a risk.”

It was another unsatisfying decision on a day full of choices such as this. As the Arithmancers shut down the System, the four fireplaces in the room roared to life. From each one a piece of parchment came out and floated to the ground.

“What is this?” He demanded.

“Sir, it appears that whoever created the crystal added the ability to convey messages via Floo. Some of the smaller nations use them as a replacement for owls and other methods. Its cutting edge spell and rune work. When she was in charge, Madame Edgecombe lobbied to upgrade our transit system, but was defeated...”

“Yes, by the owl breeders, the postal system, and the newspapers.” Again, the pettiness of politics caused Rufus a headache. He ignored the part about the messages being held in some kind of magical buffer. Now, he knew damn well who built that crystal for Voldemort. She probably threw in all the features she’d ever requested and some she hadn’t.

The message read as follows,

*By order of the Minister of Magic –*

*The Floo system has been secured until further notice. During He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s successful attack on Hogsmeade, the central area that controls the Floo was taken over. This message is to inform you that we cannot protect you against the dark forces. You are not safe. Both Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter are now dead.*

*With the Floo network out of our control, the Dark Lord’s forces can bypass your wards even if you have password protected your Floo.*

*Do not delay in taking actions to protect you and your family. The persons reading this are hereby authorized to destroy your Floo connection by any means necessary.*

*Minister of Magic,*

*Rufus Scrimgeour*

Rufus reread the message and conceded defeat. All over the country terrified people listening to the news broadcasts about the battle just received this letter purportedly from him. If even twenty percent of the idiots believed what they read, the damage would still be massive! A Floo connection isn't something that can just be *repared*!

"You! Get to the wireless, now! Announce that this message is a fraud. Tell them not to destroy their fireplaces. Go!"

Scrimgeour would have to get Potter out in the public again. The people would need reassurance. He grabbed another assistant, "Edgecombe has a husband. I want him brought into custody."

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Lord Voldemort looked down at the message, smiling. Right now, under the 'fog of war,' the English people were crippling their own infrastructure out of fear, creating yet more problems for the Scrimgeour administration. The panic generated by the message will be delightful.

Far less humorous was his losses; true, they had inflicted a massive amount of damage on the Minister's forces, Dumbledore was dead and Hogsmeade was in ruins. His presence would have reduced the number of his own casualties, but he had been trapped, fighting his way out of Scrimgeour's wards.

"What are your estimates, Edgecombe?"

The haggard looking witch answered nervously. She had suffered his wrath upon his escape from Scrimgeour's bunker. He stopped short of permanently maiming her because her skills were needed. "Twenty to thirty percent of the households will destroy their connections. With

the current staff of installers, it will take approximately four months to fully recover, assuming that they are all working 18 hour shifts. I have also altered the reactivation sequence on the controlling crystal. They will not be able to restart the process unless they are fortunate enough to discover the correct sequence.”

Turning to Madame Faircloth, he said, “Have some of our agents go to houses that have been abandoned and destroy the Floo connections and then join the mob demanding that they be reconnected and repaired with Ministry monies. When the installers arrive, they are to be either abducted or placed under Imperius. This will force them to give Floo installers Auror escorts. Reorganize my forces into smaller raiding and harassment groups. Avoid pitched battles with Ministry forces. Fill St. Mungo’s with injured draftees. Have our forces use curses with long term debilitating effects where possible. Their medical system is already overtaxed. I want it broken! Make it so Scrimgeour’s country cannot function. Next, the raiding teams are to focus on the Ingredient Growers’ Lobby. Destroy their greenhouses and get rumors started about shortages of key potion ingredients. Stir up economic unrest. They too will demand protection, rather loudly I suspect. The Minister claims his mob is an army. Let us see if he can effectively deploy this army.”

His top aide regarded him; she chose her words carefully, “You will force him to nationalize the Greenhouses. Some of our staunchest supporters are members of the IGL.”

He brushed aside her concerns. “With advance notice they can turn this to their favor; if they harvest early and make certain that we and they are well stocked before this begins, they will be well positioned to supply the black market as the prices spiral out of control.”

Addressing all present, he raised his voice. “My followers, we are entering a critical phase. Dumbledore is dead. We must now focus on toppling the Scrimgeour government. If we are successful, the people will remove him from power for us.”

The men and women surrounding him nodded in agreement and he dismissed them. He retired to his chamber and began looking at a hand-drawn map of the former Malfoy Manor that Lucius’ son had

provided, along with the information concerning Potter's formal wedding. Dumbledore was gone, but Potter had bested and killed the freshly minted Darius Longbottom and that troubled him. He could no longer afford to discount Potter's abilities. First he had disposed of Snape and now Longbottom. Neither man was in his league, but they clearly were not in Potter's league either.

Removing Potter would topple Scrimgeour's government. It would also remove his last problem. He would need more intelligence about the newly warded Potter Manor from his informants. He would be prepared for the final confrontation.

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Several days after the battle of Hogsmeade, a shadowy figure approached Narcissa.

"Hello, Mother."

"My son. Go ahead and speak. I've already set the privacy wards, but we have little time."

"They wish to know more about the defenses now protecting our former home."

"I am no genie. I will not grant your wishes for free."

"What do you want?"

"I wish to lead the Black family, and I want the lives of Charles Weasley and Andromeda Tonks spared, if possible."

"I will convey your requests, but I think it might be best to offer them something in return."

"The portraits in the manor are a key defense; I will tell you the secret of how work and more importantly how they can be beaten."

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*The Daily Prophet*

## *Minister Declares Curfew in Support of War Effort*

*November 3rd, 1996*

*By Rita Skeeter*

*In a widely anticipated and supported move, Minister Rufus Scrimgeour has imposed a strict curfew to be enforced throughout the land. Apparition and Portkey travel are forbidden to all non-authorized personal. The Knight Bus and personal broom travel are the only permitted means of travel between the hours of 9 PM and 5 AM. The Minister made the announcement from the main square of a rebuilding Hogsmeade with Harry Potter standing onstage. He delivered a powerful speech amid the teams of volunteers working to repair the damage to the town.*

*“For the continued well being of our people and to increase safety in the realm, I am restricting travel by non-authorized individuals. Naturally, we do not expect the enemy to adhere to this, but it will be easier to track the movements of small groups of people and your Ministry will be able to respond quicker to enemy attacks. On behalf of everyone working diligently to ensure your safety, I thank you.”*

*After a thunderous round of applause, he continued, “Hogsmeade will be rebuilt. It will be more magnificent than ever! We will honor our heroes by vanquishing those who slew them. Our enemies are mainly comprised of foreign witches and wizards and the dark creatures that have believed the lies our enemy spews. No self-respecting English magic user would visit this destruction on their own people. Those carrying the so-called Dark Lord’s mark are to be given no quarter. We shall drive them from our fair land.*

*The Floo system damage has been vastly overstated and repairs are proceeding faster than anticipated. It is sad to see our enemy reduced to the level of a prankster, desperate to cause any damage he can. Key locations will be restored as soon as practical.”*

*The Minister went on to reassure the large crowd present that the Darkness would be defeated and the dream of Albus Dumbledore would be achieved.*

*“Albus Dumbledore was a great man, who gave his life protecting the students of Hogwarts. He dreamed of a world without fear and chaos. With your support, the government will deliver that world. With brave heroes like Harry Potter leading the way we shall prevail! Alas, even Harry needs your help. He needs all of us to pull together to vanquish the darkness. Be a beacon of light. The time is now!”*

*From there, Minister Scrimgeour stopped by a recruiting center and personally thanked people standing in line waiting to be inducted into the People’s Defense Force. The applause was loud and the atmosphere upbeat.*

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*The Daily Prophet*

*More Funds for St. Mungo’s*

*November 9th, 1996*

*By Rita Skeeter*

*Friends, the Scrimgeour administration continues to deliver. Today, a spokeswoman for the Minister announced that a government sponsored expansion of St. Mungo’s Hospital. Under the new plan fifty more beds will be added before year’s end and over two hundred and fifty by the end of twelve months.*

*“The administration wants to ensure that the British Healthcare system continues to be the envy of the rest of the magical world. The healers of St. Mungo’s are quite simply extraordinary.*

*What can you at home reading this do? Volunteer and donate your time and your galleons. Come and help care for those brave warriors injured in the fight for freedom, the fight for our future. The Minister wishes to personally thank the brave wizards and witches of Abraxan Company, who have selflessly donated half their pay for the next two months to this particular effort. That is patriotism at its finest.*

*Unlike the thrice cursed foreign fighters the enemy relies on, it isn’t about the clink of coins for our brave fighters. They fight for duty,*

*honor and peace. They fight for a future for their family and they deserve every ounce of support we can give them.”*

*The response from the crowd was overwhelming. Even my heart was tugged by the outpouring of emotion. Minister Scrimgeour had planned on attending, but urgent matters of state required his personal attention. Harry Potter had also been scheduled to appear at the press conference, but was also forced to cancel at the last minute.*

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*The Daily Prophet*

*Minister Announces New Plans for Safety*

*November 12th, 1996*

*By Rita Skeeter*

*Today, speaking from the site of a repelled Death Eater attack at the Parker/Smythe Greenhouses, Minister Rufus Scrimgeour announced an even tougher policy on dealing with the foreign fighters that comprise the bulk of the enemy’s forces while touting the success of the defensive forces that have been redeployed to protect the sites .*

*“Plainly put, he’s afraid of us. He dares not face us in battle again or he’ll get the same drubbing we gave him during the victory at Hogsmeade! Instead, he orders his foreign born thugs to attack soft targets like a cowardly cur. To the fools who serve him, I say get out of our Britain. We do not want you here. If you are captured, you will be executed. Leave our borders or be buried here! We are sick of you and your time is up.”*

*It was tough talk backed by action as the first executions of captured foreign fighters are set to be carried out tonight. The Minister persuasive arguments won over support of the Wizengamot to strip the rights of non-English murderers captured during battle with the People’s Defense Force.*

*The Minister also had words of warning for those trying to take advantage of any perceived shortages of potion ingredients.*

*“First let me say there are no shortages. If necessary, I will authorize the release of Government surplus if it truly becomes an issue. Thankfully, the brave men and women of the People’s Defense Force continue to exceed even my expectations and have repelled more attacks than I care to mention. As soon as I receive a final report from my economic advisers, I will institute price controls for many ingredients. It’s nothing more than greedy persons trying to make money off of people’s fear. It will be illegal to pay more than these prices for goods. People caught in this dubious practice will be subject to the full prosecutorial power of our Government.*

*Like a coward, our enemy relies on fear and innuendo as his weapons. I’ve had reports that even his foreign fighters are beginning to desert him. Soon our enemy will have no one left to fight for him! We are winning this war! Floo service will be restored in an orderly fashion and it will be the best and most secure Floo system you have ever seen!”*

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*The New Salem Herald*

*One Witches Journey to Freedom*

*November 23rd, 1996*

*By Rita Skeeter*

*Hello all. So very nice to be on this side of the pond and away from the lies and death that consumes my homeland.*

*England is sliding further into the abyss and the darkness threatens to consume everything.*

*For the last two months, I was forced to write stories and hand them to British censors, or find myself placed in a frontline unit marching to my slaughter. By the time they were done with it, roughly every third*



word was something I had written. I never thought I would be ashamed of seeing "By Rita Skeeter" on anything.

They wouldn't let me tell the truth. I could only portray that fascist tyrant Rufus Scrimgeour in a positive light, but after my escape from the land I once loved, the truth can be told. Even his staunchest ally, Harry Potter, has begun expressing reservations about the iron fist that continues to tighten around all of England. Shortly after the massacre at Hogsmeade, one would have thought that poor Harry had become the Minister's shadow. Time and time again, Harry was trotted out like a prize Abraxan and paraded for the audience. He was allowed a few sound bites and hustled out of the spotlight and told to just stand there and look heroic.

The papers in England avoid reporting the ever widening rift that exists between Potter and Scrimgeour. They only note the increasing number of times that Harry has been canceling his appearances with the Minister. I know Harry Potter. He is as courageous and loyal as they come. It says quite a bit when he starts turning his back on you!

Furthermore, I couldn't say anything about six people stuck in a two person hospital room because of the massive numbers of wounded overflowing the hospital. I could only talk about the money desperately thrown at the hospital in some harebrained and ill-conceived expansion plan. I listened to Rufus "The Raper" of Britain give a speech in front of a pristine greenhouse saying there was no problem. Naturally, we had to ignore the five other greenhouses that had been reduced to rubble, which we weren't allowed to take pictures of. I could probably count on one hand the number of people in England who know that the Goblin council has devalued the British credit rating.

The Floo system is in shambles, commerce has screeched to a halt, people who have money might not be able to find anything to buy and will be stupefied at what they have to pay if they can find a seller willing to sell.

Britain is a crisis of epic proportions. I know. I've seen it. I barely escaped. Anarchy and chaos reign supreme. People are being dragged off the streets, never to be heard from again by both sides.

*It's no longer one Dark Lord trying to take over Britain. It's one Dark Lord trying to wrest power from another Dark Lord and it is the citizens who pay the price. The French are lobbying the ICW to institute a policy of containment no matter who prevails and the motion is gaining support from other mainland European countries!*

*I cannot lay this all at Scrimgeour's feet. The Dark Lord does his part too. Every morning, we started with a quick head count to make certain that everyone was still alive. There was no eating or drinking allowed for one hour to make certain that no one was disguised by Polyjuice. Twice, our head count came up one person short and we simply accepted it and adjusted our number downward.*

*I have met the Dark Lord in person. He lives for strife and conflict. Should he gain power over England, he will unite them and lead a crusade against the Muggles. I doubt it will stop there. He would see the world consumed for his own amusement.*

*A once proud nation is being ripped apart before our very eyes. The tears the world cries are salted with the blood of the fallen.*

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*The New Salem Herald*

*Noted Journalist Found Murdered*

*November 29th, 1996*

*By Michelle Chandler*

*Francine Amorita Skeeter's journey to freedom chronicled in this paper lasted a mere five days. Last night, authorities were dispatched by concerned colleagues to investigate her absence at a Herald function intending to honor her bravery and courage.*

*She and her bodyguard were found dead. There were signs of forced entry and the usage of Dark Magic including traces of the Forbiddens.*

*Ms. Skeeter was a harsh critic of both the English Minister and the Dark Lord, blaming both for the quagmire that once was the most powerful Wizarding Nation on the planet.*

*A spokeswizard for the American Wizarding Congress declined to release specific details noting that the investigation was still in progress, but did release this statement.*

*“It saddens all freedom loving people to learn of Rita’s untimely death. In past years, her stories entertained us from the other side of the Atlantic. Only recently did she truly make her mark. Like Paul Revere racing on his glamour covered broomstick, she warned us that the British were coming. The strife in England is of the utmost concern to the President and Congress. We will continue to monitor the situation closely and work with the allies abroad to determine the best course of action in these troubling times.*

*For now, let us remember a heroine and champion of the truth that has been taken from us far too early.”*

*The Bureau of Investigations continues to aggressively pursue leads in this case. Numerous suspects are being questioned. The remaining three articles Rita penned will appear in a special edition tomorrow.*

*On a personal note, in the limited amount of time I knew her, I found Rita to be a delightful and sophisticated lady. She possessed a sharp wit and a keen mastery of the written word.*

*Please join the staff of this paper in praying for her spirit in the afterlife.*

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Harry cleared his throat abruptly causing both Ron and Hermione to leap apart. Both had been rather preoccupied. “I’m not interrupting anything was I?”

Ron smirked, “Oh of course not, mate! Hermione just had something in her eye.” He waved to Tonks standing at the end of the passageway.

“And you were just warming your hands inside her blouse before you could take that mote out? I’ve seen many horrible things, but now I’m scarred for life!”

“Oi! Hermione and I don’t have our own private room. We have to make do like the rest of the students.”

Hermione recovered from her embarrassment to ask, “What’s going on Harry?”

His happy demeanor faded. “I just needed to take a walk and clear my head. I saw two friends rather alone on my map and figured I could pay a visit.”

“What does the Minister want now?”

“More public appearances, more telling people that it isn’t that bad, more lies. He even had Percy deliver his latest ‘request’. I don’t know if I have the stomach for it.”

Hermione knotted her brow before speaking. “The people need hope...”

“Yeah, that was the same line Percy used. I shot him down and asked him how much hope he really had at the moment. I asked him if I going out and standing at the Minster’s side was going to help him find Penny and get his son back. I felt like a complete and utter git after saying it, but it got my point across. Public appearances aren’t going to stop Riddle and every one of these idiotic dog and pony shows is wasting time that I need to be dueling and training!”

“Easy mate, you’re practically living in the Room of Requirements already. You can only do so much,” Ron said earnestly.

“It’s not enough. Riddle’s becoming more active again. He’s leading some of the raids personally.”

His two friends moved close to his side lending him their support. Hermione said, “We believe in you, Harry. Is there anything we can do to help?”

“Yeah, Harry, if you want we could get Hermione to whip up a batch of Polyjuice and I could go to some of these idiotic public appearances for you?”

“Ron, they occasionally ask me to speak at these things...”

“Oh. I could get Dad to coach me.”

“How is your dad?”

“He’s staying at Bill’s flat. He doesn’t want to go anywhere near Hogsmeade.”

“I wouldn’t either. Thanks for the offer, but I’ll get by. Besides, it’s only a matter of time before Riddle tries something at one of these things. The Minister’s people basically drag the reporters to all these unannounced press conferences. The locations are changing all the time, but I know it’s only a matter of time before he gets lucky or the Minister gets sloppy. I’d rather not have you there, playing me, if that happens.”

Ron gulped noticeably at the prospect of fighting Voldemort. Harry couldn’t blame him. Of those left alive, only Harry and Professor Flitwick knew what it was like to square off against Lord Voldemort. To be perfectly honest, Flitwick had several people helping and every time Harry had faced his nemesis, Voldemort had been hampered in some way shape or form through choice or circumstance. Harry’s luck wasn’t likely to hold out for the next encounter.

“Don’t worry. You guys are helping me. You’re keeping all the rest of the students from bothering me and Susan. Don’t think I haven’t noticed and believe me, I appreciate it.”

Hermione looked thoughtful for a moment, “Harry, rumors are starting to go around about Susan.”

“What rumors?”

“That she’s pregnant. I’m doing my best to head them off. I’ve got Parvati helping me ...”

“Hermione, have you told Ron?”

Ron looked suspicious. “Told me what?”

Harry answered, “That she really is pregnant.”

“Bloody hell! She is! Really?”

Harry was impressed that Hermione kept the secret from Ron.

Hermione shushed her boyfriend. “She’s missed a few morning classes and people have noticed. I’ve been telling her to blame it on her ankle injury, but the glamours won’t hide it much longer. She’s already almost three months along.”

“We’re going to announce it after the Winter Holidays. I’m just worried that it’ll make Susan even more of a target.”

“Is that another reason you’ve been distancing yourself from us lately.”

Harry shrugged. “No, not really, I’m just so bloody busy! Plus every time we’ve gotten together we usually end up talking about the war. Trust me! That’s the last thing I want to talk about when I go take a walk. You know what’s funny...”

“What?”

“I believe I finally understand Dumbledore trying to protect me from all this. Last year, all I was worried about was Umbridge and my useless lessons with Snape. I can’t believe that I thought *that* was hard!”

“So, what can we talk about that isn’t related to the war? With professional Quidditch cancelled the Cannons are on their longest non-losing streak ever!” Ron asked trying to lighten the mood.

“Are you and Susan ready for the formal wedding?” Hermione asked cheerfully.

“As ready as we can be, Hermione. Bill’s team has done a top-notch job with the wards. Scrimgeour wants to broadcast it live over the

wireless. We're trying to keep the guest list low. Where are the two of you going for the holidays?"

Ron laughed, "Bill's new place is big enough. Hermione's having her parents come by and I heard a rumor that I'm getting a formal introduction."

Hermione rolled her eyes, "Dad's going to lure you into a game of poker and give you the overprotective parent talk. Honestly, he still thinks I'm eleven!"

"You mean the card game where the losers have to take off their clothes? Dean keeps saying..." Ron said.

Harry was pretty sure Ron was putting one on her. Either way it worked. "Goodness no!"

"Listen, Susan and I want the two of you as Godparents. I'd already mentioned it to Hermione a ways back, but I wanted to officially ask both of you."

Hermione beamed. Ron thought for a moment and smiled. "Sure we'll help take care of the little nipper. I'd be honored."

His girlfriend enlightened him. "Susan's having triplets."

"Bloody hell! What did I just agree to?"

-----

"He has agreed to your terms, Mother. The Weasley you are so fond of and Aunt Andromeda will be spared, provided the three of you leave the country."

"I accept those terms."

Draco shuffled his feet nervously. "What information do you have for me to pass on?"

"The external defenses are solid, but not impenetrable. I have a basic ward map here. Memorize it and destroy it in case they search you.

You can either have a Legilimens retrieve it, or use a Pensieve. Either way, the secret entrance will make the wards meaningless. Inside, the paintings can cast minor spells, but the energy they draw will come from the head of the Black family. Potter's power is not limitless."

"So, Potter will quickly exhaust himself."

"You are correct. Against a small force, the barrage of minor curses would be overwhelming, but against a larger force, he will tire rapidly. He has also spoken to the acting Headmistress about animated statues similar to the chess pieces she once enchanted. Anti-Apparition wards are erected and Portkey wards prevent incoming ones but not outgoing ones."

She paused looking around to be certain they were alone. "The ceremony will be in the ballroom. Scrimgeour may or may not be present, but expect eight to ten Aurors, real ones, not the draftees and twenty-five guests. Roughly half of them will be schoolchildren. Current plans have six broom riders patrolling the perimeter of the wards.

She straightened up and cast an appraising look at him. "Now, tell me how you are getting along with the former Head Girl? It did not take McGonagall long to rectify Dumbledore's error."

"Melissa is rather annoyed at the loss of status, but she knows the title is just a trifle."

"Do you care for her?"

"She is attractive and smart. I anticipate the Baron formally acknowledging me as her suitor over the holidays. Why do you ask?"

"I was curious why you hadn't asked me to make certain that her life is protected in the event Potter prevails?"

Draco scoffed, "Do you *actually* believe he will?"

"You disappoint me, Draco. The head of a great family has to consider all eventualities. Harry has made it this far. When concocting



a scheme, you should never leave anything to chance. He will be at a disadvantage, but in the middle of a battle, there are no certainties. Since this is likely the last time we will be meeting before the holidays, do you wish me to work to protect her life in the event that the so-called 'light' side wins?"

"Yes. I suppose so, though her family's stature would be greatly diminished. Still, it would make her more dependent on my goodwill. Yes, please do."

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"I asked them and they said, 'yes'," Harry reported to Susan.

"Harry, did you honestly think they would turn you down?"

"Are you still upset that I wouldn't budge on Hannah?"

"No, not really. She's an emotional basket case anyway. It'd likely be her mum doing all the work anyway. Besides, I adore Hermione. She's just as much my friend now. I don't really have any close enough male friends that I would consider. Guys who used to joke with me now seem somewhat lost around me. I must say that being married to you has put a real crimp in my social life."

Susan promptly ducked the pillow he hurled at her as he replied. "Funny, I still catch a few girls staring at me. That Vane girl is a borderline stalker."

She cheated, using her wand to banish it back at him. "Oh that's easy to explain. You are the ultimate 'Forbidden Fruit'. They are certain that they can take you away from me and all they have to worry about is ickle Susie. I, on the other hand, am 'Certain Doom'! Any bloke trying to chat me up gets to face you, a wizard training day and night to fight someone that most are still scared to name. Remember that demo you did for the old DA last week with you and Professor Flitwick going after each other?"

"Yeah, they wanted to be more involved in the war?" He began to cheat with the pillow as well, banishing it back at her while casting an

illusion to duplicate it. She ducked the real one and tried to banish the illusion.

"I think that put more than a few in their place. I could tell the two of you were going extra hard, but mostly I just watched the expressions. Wayne and Justin about pissed their pants seeing what a real fight was like. Ron and Hermione had seen you before, so they didn't count. I think Cho was all googly-eyed, regretting breaking up with you."

"I'm not entirely sure we were ever together. Either way, she's just as bad as Hannah in the emotional stability department. Megan and Seamus were impressed. I've seen them working really hard in Defense lately. Any truth to the rumor that they're dating?"

"Yes, I heard she keeps 'catching him' on her Prefect patrols. Right about the same place Mandy always 'catches' Terry."

Harry frowned, "Nice to see our school is being protected."

"I don't think there's any protection from teenage hormones."

He sat down on the edge of the bed next to her. "I suppose. I caught Ron warming his hands inside Hermione's blouse while doing a dental examination. He moaned about not having a private room like we do."

Susan looked at him slyly. "We do have one, don't we?"

"Yes"

"Are you doing an evening training session tonight?"

"No, Flitwick says for me to rest. We're doing a morning session and then you and I are Portkeying to the outer wards of our new home. A full company of Aurors will be going with us."

"So, what you're saying is that I have you all to myself tonight? You've already said goodbye to Hermione and Ron until the wedding? There's no other crisis that requires your immediate attention?"

He smiled at her. "Yes, yes and no."

She loosened her robe as she gave him a hungry look. "I did mention that now that I'm not morning sick any more that I'm getting a daily infusion of very interesting hormones?"

Harry unbuttoned his shirt and dropped it on the bed.

"Harry, go ahead and take the glove off."

"I bet if took it off and showed her the claw, Romilda wouldn't be so eager to date me."

He peeled away the glove revealing the near skeletal hand beneath. "It doesn't look like it's gotten any worse."

"I keep hoping that if I kill Riddle, it'll break my link with the Dementors. I wonder if it goes back to the whole 'neither can live thing?' Everyone believes that I was cursed in the battle of Hogsmeade. I haven't gone out of my way to correct them."

Susan touched it. It felt cool to the touch and like so many times before, he recoiled from her touch, but she persisted. "I'm not afraid of you Harry. I'm afraid for you, but never of you."

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"Greetings, my lord." Draco Malfoy said. His voice did not waver. Wherever his father was, Draco knew he would be proud.

"Rise, young Lord Malfoy. You are welcome here."

Standing in front of this legend, Malfoy knew that Potter had no chance. The wizard in front of him radiated power. He was never more certain of anything in his life.

"What news do you bring me?"

"My mother described the methods of protection Potter will use in my former house. She had me stare at the ward map, so that the image could be retrieved by you. She was correct that my belongings were

searched by the Defense Force before I was allowed to leave the castle. If you bring a Pensieve, I will gladly provide it.”

Lord Voldemort regarded him with penetrating red eyes. “We could do that, but I prefer to use Legilimency. I will be able to verify that your mind has not been tampered with and also experience your emotions during the encounter.”

The boy paled slightly, “If that is your wish.”

“Indeed it will be rather painful for you, but your suffering will be rewarded. I have agreed to your Mother’s requests. What is it you want, Draco?”

“I wish to fight alongside you and to be there when you kill Potter!”

“Ah, a thirst for revenge – I’m certain Lucius would be pleased. Very well, Draco Malfoy, you will have a place amongst my forces for the assault. Now, stare into my eyes and focus on the memory.”

Lord Voldemort was a master of the mental arts. He could be subtle, but that was seldom his way and he decided to see where the boy’s threshold for pain actually was.

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From the thicket of woods roughly a mile from the target, Lord Voldemort watched small groups of people arrive for the festivities. He was certain Draco Malfoy believed everything he had relayed, but the Dark Lord did not rise to his position by merely believing the things others had seen. He witnessed the wedding gifts being scrutinized and the people being hurriedly ushered inside of the ward barrier. Lord Voldemort’s newly refurbished Necrodragon would give pause to the six broom riders attempting to control the airspace and his remaining trio of Giants would occupy those on the ground. The real battle would be taking place inside.

Potter’s sidekicks arrived and proceeded to start pointing things out to the Aurors. It caused him to sneer. The Aurors clearly did not enjoy being told their job. Things stopped short of wands being drawn, but

even from this distance, there was tension in the air. Children playing in an adult's world! How have they managed to resist him for so long?

He had seen all he needed to. Before the day ends, the boy, his friends and all others in that building opposing him would be exterminated.

Lord Voldemort entered the cramped tunnel holding both of his wands pushing past his followers to the front of the group. Potter would be unlikely to have a match for his spare. The Ridgeback's heart had only been used to make a single wand. It was a close match. There would be little disadvantage using it. He adjusted the straps on his Unicorn skin vest.

The eight Trolls had been shrunk to human size using potions. He would have preferred to use his remaining trio of Giants, but the draughts would not work on those creatures. The sub-humans would go first and the twenty Death Eaters would follow. If the Trolls did not move quickly enough he would simply banish the creatures forward.

All his remaining forces would occupy the Ministry elsewhere. One of the Muggle warehouses adjacent to Diagon Alley had been converted for his use. There were fifty freshly created Inferii that were going to be released into the Alley simultaneously with this assault. A few other Mulciber was leading several other raiding teams that would strike in several places, intentionally triggering wards and creating havoc wherever possible.

*"It ends today. I will be rid of this boy. Without his support, Scrimgeour will crumble."*

He found the rumors that the Minister had already laid the ground work for a Ministry in Exile to be particularly delicious. Whether or not they were true was another matter. Lord Voldemort's Inner Circle had been all but replaced during this campaign. There was no room in his mind for failure. There was no need for further contingency plans.

A lone hag stood surrounded by the trolls. She was silenced, naturally, but the Banshee's shriek would kill many of the weaklings; thankfully, the trolls were immune to her screech. The others would die with blood running out of their ears. It wouldn't kill Potter, but it

might thin out the resistance. The hag's price of three newborn children was surprisingly low, though the stipulation that they be from magical humans was expected.

He checked the Muggle timepiece, unwilling to cast a spell which might be detected. If they were on time, the ceremony would have started fifteen minutes ago. There was no time like the present. Once more, he would challenge fate and make his own destiny.

"Now!" At his command the trolls drank from their gourds containing the counter to the shrinking draught and charged forward bursting into the hallway. The Banshee moved behind them with a wicked grin on her face, tossing the charmed necklace that muzzled her to the ground and crushing it beneath her foot.

"Kill them all!"

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## Chapter 41 – Before the Dawn

*December 23rd, 1996*

It took all of two seconds for Voldemort to realize they had lost the element of surprise, if, in truth, they'd ever had it. The walls of the tunnel shook as something detonated from above. He cast a levitation charm, hurling all his might into the spell, arresting the falling debris. At the tunnel entrance behind them, a reddish mist appeared.

"Poison gas!" One of his minions cried out, clutching his throat as he dropped to the ground.

"Forward, into the mansion," he screamed. The path of retreat was cut off. There was no going back, even if this was a trap. Rookwood cast a bubblehead charm on Voldemort while the Archmage kept the tunnel from collapsing.

He still had the Trolls in front to absorb the brunt of the ambush. Whether they'd been betrayed, or whether this was more dumb luck for the Potter brat, it did not matter; he was the most powerful wizard

in the world! He hurried his troops into the hall and released the spell holding the tons of earth from crushing them.

Quickly he assessed the situation. Two of the Trolls lay dying as fire whips sliced the air like streamers released at a celebration. The Banshee had been crushed, much like the bauble she had just destroyed. Only one arm stretched out from under the heavy stone table. He didn't have the luxury of appreciating the irony as he banished the table towards the mansion's defenders.

The Trolls continued to soak up damage as he began venting his wrath on the Troll's attackers. The creatures were slowed by some kind of paste applied to a section of the hallway. It did not halt their advance, but it slowed them significantly. Their faces contorted in silent pain as they struggled against the relentless floor.

The sticking was cute, but it was an error on Potter's part. A jet of fire ignited the goo. Nothing gets a Troll moving like fire and the wall of flame gave him time to organize the rest of his fighters.

Spells darted through the air. The hallway was barren, emptied of articles that could be transfigured or used as shields. Charmed chairs and benches formed a moving wall for the wizards at the entrance to the ballroom. He sent a wall of force directly into that barrier, shattering it into deadly shards of shrapnel. He was Voldemort. He was power itself and their clever plan would fail against the likes of him.

Heedless of the fire, the statues charged the burning Trolls. Swinging wildly, one of the beasts crushed a statue with his club. The bishop shattered easily enough; perhaps too easily, as two flying balls shot out from the debris – enchanted bludgers. They immediately began swirling around the burning creature, striking it like a swarm of angry birds.

Again, the ploy was clever, but he remained unimpressed as the Troll fell to the floor, pummeled mercilessly by the manic orbs. Voldemort's own Killing Curse finished the troll. Not wanting anything to be wasted, he triggered a necromantic corpse detonation that destroyed the bludgers and two more approaching chess pieces.

The spells of his minions joined his and the Trolls caught in the middle died in a horrific clash of magic. He detonated two more demi-human corpses closest to the opposition and the explosions drove the defenders from the ballroom entrance, greatly widening the opening into the room.

Rookwood dispelled the silencing charm and the dying screams of the Trolls reached Voldemort's ears. Bludgers from the broken statues raced towards him. He conjured a solid shield that shattered the three zooming towards him. One of his Death Eaters was less quick and was struck in the face by the remaining ball. The body slid to the ground lifelessly. The cracked mask broke away, revealing the mangled face of Draco Malfoy.

Had he really expected better from Lucius' spawn? "Forward! Destroy the bludgers and kill them all!"

Obviously, Narcissa had thrown her lot in with Potter. Her spawn had been duped by his own treacherous mother. He grudgingly admired the layered defenses: poison gas, explosives, potions coating the floor, and enchanted statues with deadly payloads. Potter knew that he was outclassed, and had finally turned to some competent advisors. Potter had come a long way, but it was not far enough!

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The waiting was getting to Harry. People were going to die today, for him and because of him. There was little he could do about it and no real guarantee that he would live through all of this. The plan for this ambush was conceived shortly after the Goblins had purchased Malfoy Manor.

Originally, he had hoped to lure Voldemort to the mansion and fill it with charmed bludgers as Dobby had used on him so long ago. Dumbledore had convinced him that it was too rash to work alone and they began to concoct a battlefield that was drawn from all of Harry's experiences. Perhaps the Dementor aura wasn't the power-the-Dark-Lord-knows-not - perhaps it was the life Harry had led and all of the adventures that had prepared him for this moment.



After Dumbledore's death, Harry realized he couldn't do this himself. He had to bring other people into it and he needed someone convincing to pull it all off.

He needed Narcissa.

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Less than a week before the ambush, Harry had stood meters from Narcissa as she conversed with Draco. He waited a full minute after her son had left before removing his invisibility cloak.

"I pray he will stay clear of this." Narcissa hoped aloud.

Harry replied, "For his own sake, I hope so too. If I didn't know where your true loyalties were, I'd have believed you too."

"Are you certain of this, Harry? Do you really want to fight him now?" Narcissa asked breathlessly.

"You said it yourself. If we wait much longer, there may not be a Britain left to save. I'd rather fight him on my terms, in a place where we can control the battlefield. I'll need every advantage I can get."

"How is your wife taking this?"

Harry's expression was slightly pained, "She's accepted it. I won't say she's happy about it, but Susan understands."

"You mean she's a convincing actress."

Harry gave a small chuckle, "You needn't worry about our relationship; Narcissa. Susan did not hold back when she told me her opinion of the plan. My ears are still ringing, but she's the most practical person I've ever met. It didn't take long for her to stop thinking with her heart and start thinking with her head."

Narcissa nodded, fully understanding Susan Potter's motivations. "She's willing to fight for what she wants, just as I am. Now, the terms of our agreement ...?"

Harry removed the Black family ring, holding it in his palm. "I, Harry James Potter, under no influence of sorcery or any other magics affecting my judgment, freely abdicate my leadership of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, that the headship may fall back to Narcissa Black, a true child of the Ancient and Noble House of Black. All rights, titles and vaults of this line are now yours, Lady Black."

Narcissa said nothing as she received the ring from him, daubing a drop of her blood on the face of the ring to activate the magics it contained. Then she looked up. "No reservations on your part Lord Potter? You may have diminished the vaults, but you are still handing a fortune in galleons and an even more valuable piece of your powerbase."

"No, Narcissa, I have no reservations; this was Sirius' dream for me to make something out of his family. If the Blacks are to be redeemed, let it be one who truly carries the name. Susan and I have more than enough responsibility between the Potter and Bones lines. I might remind you that you're using your son to lure a Dark Lord into a trap and if you weren't pregnant, you'd be fighting alongside of me in that trap."

Narcissa continued, "I will temporarily abdicate my role to Andromeda, who is powerful, but no fighter and perfectly suited for the demands of the moment. Charles, Theodore, and Nymphadora will protect her while she defends the new House of Black. He will think that the portraits are depleting you, when in fact they are drawing their strength from her. You just have to play the part of a tired hero."

"I've been playing that part since my fourth year."

"Touché! You're initial plan was flawed and relied too much on your own actions, but after the refinements by McGonagall and Dawlish, I believe it is the best chance for victory."

"I'll do everything in my power."

"You'll have to, otherwise all is lost."

"I know. Farewell, Lady Black."

“Fight well, Lord Potter.”

-----

Harry’s trip down memory lane was interrupted as Percy streaked into the ballroom. The ghost had been spying on the forces in the not-so secret passageway. “Eight Trolls and a Banshee at the front!”

“The silencing field in the hallway will take care of her! How many Death Eaters?”

The ghost spoke hurriedly. “Roughly twenty!”

Harry looked at Hermione Granger. She nodded and all the black chess pieces rose from their pedestals and began to march towards the hallway. Everyone checked to make certain the charm that would prevent the bludgers from attacking them was firmly affixed. Professor Flitwick directed the frontline defenders. The second group would protect the first with an animated wall of debris. Cauldrons filled with sticking solution were overturned in the hallway. They had drilled for over a week in the Room of Requirement.

Harry eyes wandered to Ron Weasley, who clenched his wand and shuffled on his legs nervously.

The redhead spoke, “Just like we planned it. Let the first lines of defense weaken them and we’ll counterattack as soon as they reach the ballroom. You just stand there and look worn out.”

Hermione turned towards him, “William just sent the signal to those outside. They’ll collapse the passageway shortly, driving them towards us. Merlin be with us all!”

Harry instinctively looked at Susan for reassurance and then realized how stupid he was being. Lupin was giving her a kiss for luck. It was rather disconcerting.

He smiled, getting what little humor he could out of the situation, “Lupin, get your tongue out of my wife’s mouth!”

There was no time for a witty response as the Aurors at the frontline shouted. "They're coming!"

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Hermione Granger came to. Where was she? What had happened? Was she a prisoner? She wasn't bound and felt instinctively for her wand. It was still there in its holster.

Her arms felt leaden as she struggled to rise from the cot.

"Take it easy Miss Granger," a voice she recognized as Pomona Sprout said.

"What happened?" Her words came out slurred. She desperately tried to remember what had happened. She was in the Hogwarts infirmary. Momentarily, she panicked. Her eyes focused on several other beds. Ron was next to her, still sleeping. She saw the Abbott sisters and several others as well. The last thing she could remember was Ron's father and Bill proposing a toast to Harry and Susan as they prepared to leave.

Susan's voice answered. "You were brought to Hogwarts. They gave you a sleeping draught so you wouldn't put up a fight."

"But the wedding..."

"Is a highly choreographed ambush," Susan finished for her. "Right now, the battle has already started."

Hermione tried to stand, but fell back onto her bed. Narcissa Black paced nervously up and down the aisle. "We should go help," Hermione said.

Susan shook her head sadly as Narcissa answered. "Harry wanted to make certain you lot are safe. If they fail, we're leaving for Australia. I pray we do not have to go."

"I should be at Harry's side. He needs me!" Hermione protested in a weak voice.

“Technically, you are beside him. It just happens to be Minerva McGonagall who’d been Polyjuiced into your form. Mr. Dawlish gets to walk for a few hours on Mr. Weasley’s legs until his doses wear out. Harry has several competent allies in this battle.”

Hermione drank the cup of juice thrust into her hands. It cleared the rest of the cobwebs in her mind. She wanted to scream in frustration. She hadn’t felt so useless since waking up in the aftermath of the fight at the Department of Mysteries.

Instead of crying she looked at Susan who had regained her composure. “Did they drug you too?”

“No. I’d have been happy to take the draught, but the babies...” she trailed off before continuing. “I’ve got a cheering charm on me, but it isn’t doing a blessed thing! Though, I’m guessing I’d be a wreck without it. Harry actually used the babies against me when I demanded to be there. He said that it might be one of our children that would fulfill the prophecy.”

“What did you say to him?”

“Oh, nothing polite, I assure you; it was a blazing row. I think I tarnished my whole ‘take everything in stride’ image. Most of my rant was unrepeatable. I told him that he’d better not lay that burden on our children and that he’d better damn well win! In the end, I knew I’d be a liability, just like you, Ron, or pretty much any one that Harry really cared about.”

Hermione was torn, trying to decide if she should be offended or not by Harry’s actions. Instead, she asked, “Who is playing you?”

Hermione asked mostly out of curiosity about the interaction between Polyjuice and an expecting mother. If the potion would duplicate the body, would it actually create a fetus too? If the mother was in labor, could the fetus be birthed? What would happen to the newborn at the end of one hour?

The Wizarding world was somewhat ignorant of the moral and ethical dilemmas that they could create simply by waving a wand or brewing a draught. When she was nervous, Hermione occupied her mind with

philosophical arguments. Apparently, she was very nervous at the moment.

“Tonks is morphed up as me,” Susan answered glumly.

“Oh.” Hermione briefly considered discussing her Polyjuice theories with Susan, but shelved the idea, doubting that they would be welcome at this time. With the others sleeping soundly around them, unaware that their fate was being decided miles away, Hermione hoped that good would triumph over evil.

Finally she had to ask, “Who came up with all this?”

Narcissa replied. “The original idea came from Harry, though he credited a house elf of all things. It was something he and Dumbledore were working on after the Goblins bought my former home. Others, including myself, made contributions, but Harry felt it would be best to face him on a field of his choosing.” Narcissa started to say something else, but Hermione saw that the older witch’s attention was drawn to one of the four ribbons wrapped around her wrists. The pink, brown, and red ribbons remained unchanged, but the golden one had just turned black.

“No! Draco! My son! Why didn’t you listen?”

“What is it?” Both Hermione and Susan asked at the same time. Susan glanced at the green ribbon around her wrist and Hermione understood what the charmed ribbon did.

The distraught woman sobbed for a moment. “He’s gone. I all but begged him not to be there! I’ve killed him. I just helped kill my own son!”

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The corpse detonations drove the defenders back. Once again, the lack of quality Necromancers in England saddened Lord Voldemort. The fire and the smoke provided ample cover for his advancing troops. Augustus Rookwood and four others used charms on their boots and ran along the walls, hurling destruction from their wands as Lord Voldemort brought the rest straight down the middle.

He conjured a solid shield with his yew wand and advanced, feeling three spells impact harmlessly upon the barrier.

Curses streaked by, striking several of his fighters. Three had fallen, but the response was a volley of Killing Curses. This would be a magnificent sight to behold in a Pensieve. Lord Voldemort advancing, spells slamming into his shield surrounded by emerald streaks of death. It was glorious! Some were blocked by the charmed objects, some missed altogether, but at least five found their mark.

As the second volley passed him, he dispelled his shield and fired a pair of detonation curses, blasting the opposition backwards, further into the ballroom. His blood was pumping and he had never felt more alive than this moment! There was a tug at the mental link connecting him and the boy, a tug that he ignored. *'This, this was their mighty trap! This was the best you can do without Dumbledore! Hah! Learn some new tricks boy!'*

Lord Voldemort slowed, allowing his fighters to pass him. It was one thing to be arrogant; it was quite another to be careless. As the last of the black chess pieces were destroyed, the white ones began to advance.

One of Rookwood's "flankers" leapt into the room heedless of the warnings about the paintings. While that Death Eater was casting a blasting curse, four minor jinxes from nearby paintings hit him, causing him to "fall" from the side of the wall. Three more potent curses from very real Aurors slammed into the body, ensuring that Lord Voldemort would not have the opportunity to personally scold the flanker.

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Harry felt the thunderous detonations of the Troll bodies. People scattered backwards as the first line of defense faltered. They regrouped and sent curses en masse, but just as quickly, Killing Curses answered, causing several people to fall. Dawlish and Flitwick continued directing the defenses as they gave ground. McGonagall sent the white chess pieces forward to buy a few moments to regroup. An alarm sounded, indicating the outer wards were under attack! If the people stationed outside couldn't turn back this second front,

there's a chance he could kill Voldemort only to die during the next attack.

Of course, there was the small task of killing Voldemort first. He would worry about what comes next after he checked that box.

He wanted to be up at the front with the others, but McGonagall shook her head. Let Riddle fight a little and wear himself down. He tried dropping his mental defenses around the link to the Dark Lord, hoping to disorient his enemy, but Riddle didn't bite. At the other end of the link Harry could feel the man mocking him.

Harry banked on the fact that the "power-the-Dark-Lord-knows-not" was Harry Potter – the sum total of his experience, the chessmen, the statues, and so many other things drawn from his past adventures. He'd pulled out all the stops. If there was a kitchen sink lying around, Harry would banish it at Riddle when the time came. Harry tried to remain calm knowing that "wearing Tom down" was a euphemism for letting other people die.

He watched the faux Hannah Abbott fall and heard Bill Weasley cry out in anguish at Emmeline Vance's death. Bill turned his wand on the Dark Lord, who was fighting with Dawlish and Flitwick, among others. Bill's curse slammed into Voldemort's armor, but did no harm. Voldemort twisted out of the way of the Charms Master's attempt to seize the initiative and killed Bill Weasley so fast it was doubtful Bill had even seen it coming.

Over half the Death Eaters had been laid low by the traps and the initial wave of combat, but the sheer power Riddle could harness was capable of turning the tide. Harry didn't care if it was too soon. He had to join the fighting.

"Tonks, McGonagall! It's now or never!" Harry shouted, only to see that Minerva was already engaged with a Death Eater, but the older woman screamed that it was too soon.

Harry ignored her. With anger fueling his magic, he cut loose at Riddle. No one else should die to improve his odds!

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The defenses were crumbling. Lord Voldemort knew this. He was dueling against as many as four at a time and like always, winning. Spells left his wands so fast that to an observer, it would appear that he was actually dual casting.

The person pretending to be Potter's sidekick was far too skilled and barked orders. Voldemort recognized the voice – Dawlish using Dumbledore's Polyjuice trick. He and Flitwick fought as a pair with the Auror defending the dwarf.

A bone breaker slammed into his vest. He grunted knowing it would leave a bruise and whipped a killing curse back in reply, cutting down another one.

*"Why won't they all just die?"*

Voldemort gave ground as the paintings continue snapping of spells in every direction. *"How much longer can you keep it up, Harry?"*

Pieces of debris entangled and solidified into a barrier as his two primary opponents both attempted to attack, abandoning their team tactic. Their spells failed against his shield as Voldemort finished off yet another gnat. *"You're running out of playmates, Harry! I'm coming for you!"*

Dawlish and Flitwick moved to Voldemort's left, pulling him farther away from the boy, blasting curses and cutting curses weaving a deadly rainbow through the air. The Dark Lord added his own dazzling array of colors to the firefight, but as they wandered too close to some little blonde witch's body, Voldemort played his hand. *"The fools never learn do they? Discover the wonder that is Necromancy!"*

Dawlish was closest to the detonation as the witch's body sprayed them with blood and bone. The ex-Auror caught the brunt of it. Still, the dwarf weighed much less and was sent flying through the air and into the wall. Dawlish tried to stand up, impaled with what used to be part of a female arm skewering him. As the Auror fell, he cast one final spell, which the Dark Lord easily dodged. Voldemort didn't waste a killing curse on the dying man; a well-placed piercing curse tore through the top of his skull.

He felt the rush of magic coming towards him and spun out of the way. It gouged a trench into the masonry – a cutting curse and a damn fine one at that. A salvo of blasting curses and piercing curses followed it.

*“At last! No more games Potter! No more distractions!”*

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Harry missed with his cleaver. Voldemort was too fast! Those that trained Harry told him that he was as fast as humanly possible. Some of Voldemort's rituals had clearly taken him beyond that level. Harry quickly followed with an ice spear. That Voldemort banished across the room.

Tonks fired a swarm of hailstones, knowing it wouldn't do much damage, but even with the Dark Lord's speed, he would have to take some hits. One of the remaining Aurors tried for a lucky strike with a reductor. Harry screamed a warning as Riddle answered by transfiguring a chair into an Arcomantula.

Harry banished it off the man, but was forced to defend himself against a wall of debris hurled at him. He ducked under most of it, but a vase smashed into his arm knocked him sideways. It spoiled his return fire as Voldemort rounded on Tonks.

*“See your precious wife die, Potter! Avada Kedavra!”*

Tonks cast a slicing hex using Susan's willow and Phoenix feather wand, just as they had practiced. As Harry expected, Riddle was using his yew wand primarily, but every spell that came at Harry was with the wand in Riddle's right hand. Tonks' borrowed wand locked with it and once more the sound of Fawkes' song could be heard as the brother wands invoked the magical cage.

None of Voldemort's fighters had been present the last time the brother wand effect had occurred. All of the defenders had witnessed it several times during their practices. They used this advantage to decimate their opponents.

Harry knew he had seconds to press his advantage while Tonks held him in check. The cage prevented him from directly attacking Tom, but there was something else he could do. Using a cutting curse from his holly and chimera fur wand, he killed the Arcomantula and transformed into his raven form.

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The Dark Lord was frustrated, caught in the brother wand effect from Potter's little bitch! The light forces were using this as an opportunity to finish off his remaining followers. He needed to break the hold quickly and finish them! Focusing his will he fought against the witch. She wasn't in her husband's league, not by any means. The bitch, however, refused to let go, pitting her feeble powers against him. Her features began to melt.

*"Ah, well played Harry. Your Metamorph bodyguard substituting for your dear wife. No matter, she still is no match for me!"*

That was when he felt the icy chill of a Dementor. What were *they* doing here? He had sent the few remaining ones on the raids! No, it's coming from a black bird. That was Potter's Animagus form. Suddenly, it all made sense! No wonder the Dementors feared the boy!

He cried in anger as the aura gnawed at him. He couldn't summon a Patronus because the thrice cursed link with the other wand held by the woman who would not let go. She held on despite the fact that the aura was clearly affecting her too. He redoubled his mental efforts to resist the debilitating field of energy the Animagus directed at him.

The female cried, sinking to her knees and holding her wand with both hands, "I'll see you in hell! Die you bastard!"

Potter's Dementor-like attributes continued to punish him and yet the woman still held onto the connection. The phantoms of spells were jetting out of the witch's wand as his will and power overcame hers, but she refused to let go. One of Dumbledore's insipid Order members could be heard shouting for her to drop her wand, but the witch refused, until moments later the wand literally exploded in her hands and she collapsed in a heap.

*“Expecto Patronum!”* Voldemort shouted, shaking from the prolonged exposure to the aura and the drain from fighting the Metamorph. His snake Patronus struck the raven out of the sky, sinking its ethereal teeth into one of the wings. Potter transformed midway back to the ground, hitting it hard.

Voldemort followed with a piercing curse that burrowed through Potter’s armor and opened a wound in the cursed brat’s midsection. The boy screamed, and slapped his injured arm over the wound. Voldemort sent a second cutting curse at him, but Potter blocked it. Frantically, the Dark Lord searched his spirit for reserves of energy to finish off this pretender, while his opponent rapidly fired spells at him.

Painful bits of ice struck him in on his right side, one in the temple momentarily blinding him. The Order Werewolf standing over his fallen witch screamed at him, sending a constant stream of hail. Lord Voldemort whipped his wand around with the Killing Curse on his lips when Potter struck back.

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*“Crucio!”* Bellatrix had once told Harry that he needed to want to inflict pain. Harry wanted Tom to suffer like never before! The curse lifted Riddle off the ground and slammed him into the wall. Remus had given Harry an opening and he seized it. Harry forced his legs forward, keeping his nearly skeletal hand on his stomach where he could feel his ruined intestines threatening to spill out. The arm itself was badly injured from exposure to Riddle’s Patronus. That was the last thing Harry wanted to worry about right now!

His own pain didn’t matter. His own life didn’t matter anymore either. Riddle struggled to rise and was actually trying to cast a spell from his wands, when both Charlie and Remus struck him with disarming charms. Both wands flew from the Dark Lord’s hands as he was bashed into the wall for a second time.

Harry couldn’t keep the spell locked onto him and despite nearly fifteen seconds under the Cruciatus curse, Riddle stood roaring in pain. A mere ten feet separated them.

One hand reached out and Harry realized he was going to summon one of his wands using wandless magic. Harry looked to stop it, before he realized it was a feint.

He'd thrown something at Harry and its speed increased with a wandless banisher.

Instinctively, Harry threw his arm up, uncaring of the wound in his gut. The white bone knife ripped into his flesh, nearly severing his cursed limb. The force of the strike whipped Harry's arm around with a painful snap.

Harry spun and thrust his wand out towards Voldemort who was diving for an abandoned wand on the floor. "*Tonare!*" Harry's blasting curse at nearly point blank range blew a hole into Voldemort's already weakened vest and through to the other side, spraying blood onto the wall.

Both fighters fell, Voldemort looked as if he was trying to cast another wandless spell, but instead gurgled blood out his mouth and collapsed. Harry too was lying on his side bleeding freely from abdomen and his pierced and broken arm. People were rushing towards him, but all he could do was stare into the eyes of the man who had brought so much misery upon Harry's world and watch as the life left Tom Riddle's eyes.

For the first time in years, perhaps his entire life, Harry was truly free. How long he would be able to enjoy his freedom was another question.

"Hang in there Harry! I won't lose you too! Charlie cauterize his arm! To hell with it, the knife's probably poisoned! Take it off at the break. If it isn't, we'll try to reattach it later. I'll work on his stomach. Harry swallow this blood replensisher! Come on cub, swallow it! Fucking swallow it! Give me a damn bezoar!"

Choking on his own blood and the potion, Harry almost laughed. He'd never heard Remus Lupin use such language.

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*December 25th, 1996*

Like many years before, wizards and witches celebrated in the streets. The Dark Lord had again been felled by Harry Potter. For all intents and purposes, the war was over.

Harry slowly opened his eyes. He recognized the room as one on the high security wing at St. Mungo's. His throat felt raw and parched. A smelly poultice covered his aching stomach, bandages soaked in exotic and definitely odorous potions.

Slowly he moved his neck, looking for his arm. As he feared, there was nothing below the elbow. In all likelihood, he would be the flightless raven and the one-armed wizard from now on, but he was alive and that meant more to him than anything.

In the chair next to his bed, Susan was sleeping with a book open on her lap. Without his glasses, he couldn't make it out, but it looked like one of the many parenting books she had been reading of late. She was beautiful when she was slept; he liked watching her.

In a perfect world, he'd get up and wake her with a kiss. Another look at his stomach told him that he wasn't going anywhere for a while. He settled for reaching with his right hand and taking her left hand in his.

"Harry! You're awake!"

"Can't get much by you, can I?"

She looked flustered and tears came to her eyes. Both her hands closed around his and she had a bit of a death grip on him. "I almost lost you!"

"You didn't. It doesn't matter now. I made it. Well, most of me made it."

"They couldn't salvage your arm. I'm sorry. We're still not sure if the knife was poisoned, but it did something to the flesh around the wound. The healers didn't want to chance reattaching it, but Mister Lupin and Hermione have been working on that silver arm spell. They're pretty certain they'll have it, what was the term Hermione

used, 'reverse engineered?' Yes, I think that was it! Anyway, they think they'll have it soon."

He tried to be cheerful even though any thoughts of playing professional Quidditch were gone. "See if they can do it in gold or bronze. Silver's not really my color, too Slytherin. Besides, I wouldn't want Mooney to get jumpy whenever I pass him the salt at dinner. Can I get something to drink?"

She gave him some water and cast a breath-freshening spell on both of them before giving him an awkward, but very welcome kiss.

After that, Healer Issacs came in and checked him over. When she had left, Harry and Susan talked about the battle and the aftermath. Harry had been out for two days. It was actually Christmas day.

Tonks had perished during her struggle with Riddle. Harry had sullenly admitted that he feared Tonks had a death wish. Susan said she had witnessed the battle through Remus' memories and noting how the werewolf had begged her to break the connection and she had stubbornly refused. The autopsy concluded that Tonks had suffered a heart attack induced by the magical exhaustion and likely, though Susan refused to say it, the exposure to the Dementor aura. Andromeda had survived, but Ted Tonks had not. She would now be mourning both her daughter and husband. Harry already knew about Bill, Emmeline, and Dawlish. The curse of the Defense Teacher had claimed yet another victim. Finally, Harry broke down, making up for the crying he didn't do during the course of the war.

Susan gingerly held him and attempted to comfort him. She said Professor Flitwick was resting comfortably in the next room and recovering from his injuries. Professor McGonagall was already at Hogwarts, preparing for the students return. After a time, Susan asked him what he wanted to do now.

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"Good evening to you all. I speak to you tonight over the wireless not as your Minister, but as a fellow admirer of Harry James Potter. Through his bravery and heroism, a Dark Lord has been defeated.

Peace and order will return to this land. I have just come from seeing him and his wife at St. Mungo's.

Harry's wounds are grave, but no longer life threatening. He is in good spirits and sincerely appreciates all the well wishes. Again, I was struck by Harry's humility. When I spoke of his forthcoming Order of Merlin, Harry expressed his wishes that all the dead be honored and buried before he would accept the highest award in our land.

Now that the danger is subsiding, the Potters will be taking a bit of a vacation together and to reap the rewards of peace that they so richly deserve. I would ask that you give Harry and Susan the space and privacy they need to get on with their lives and raise their family. I was surprised to learn that Mrs. Potter is already with child!

As we look forward to the new and prosperous year ahead of us, let us look forward to a new Britain. Let us heal our wounds, bury our fallen, and rebuild our society. Under my continued stewardship, we can work to prevent the darkness from ever showing itself again on our soil!"

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*January 25th, 1997*

The man staring at Rufus Scrimgeour finished presenting his case. "My country demands that Narcissa Black, formerly known as Narcissa Malfoy, be extradited to France to stand trial for crimes committed in our country."

Rufus looked at the French Foreign Minister, who, depending on the day, was either the second or third most powerful person in France before reminding himself that he wasn't in France.

"Your demands place me in a rather difficult position, Monsieur Delacour and I understand that you have a personal stake in this as well, but I have also been allowed to view her recollection of the incident in my Pensieve and while I note that she did in fact use an Unforgivable curse, it was your wife who openly admitted to holding Charles Arthur Weasley as a hostage whom she intended to execute. I would only consider allowing the soon-to-be Narcissa Weasley over



to French authorities when your wife's trial for kidnapping, blackmail, and conspiracy to commit murder is complete. When I have a notion of the true measure of French justice, I will be able to decide if it is appropriate to hand over one of our war heroes."

"There are agreements and there are treaties between our Ministries. Is the word and signature of the English no longer good for anything?"

"Monsieur Delacour, the treaties and agreements are sound, but there are processes to be followed; there is also common sense. Narcissa Black is a war hero and the greatest hero of this war, Harry Potter refers to her as Aunt Narcissa. He granted her the title of Lady Black giving a portion of his political power to her. His voting block is one of my staunchest supporters. To honor your request would be tantamount to political suicide and for what? To appease your anger at your wife's infidelity? I have a copy of the memory here, if you choose to view it. You can clearly hear her say that this was not the first time. If you are adamant in your demands, I would also be forced, in the interests of full disclosure, to make public the attempt by your daughter on Harry Potter's life. I do believe that she was aided by Undersecretary Beaucourt's late youngest daughter."

Claude Delacour's face contorted in anger. "You are very full of yourself, good Minister, but by refusing to hand over a wanted criminal, my country can and will take this complaint to the ICW."

"Then it will join our complaint against France for the inordinate amount of French Witches, Wizards, Vampire and Veela that participated in our war on the side of the Dark Lord."

The fair-haired man bellowed, "You know none of that was sanctioned!"

There was no smile on Rufus Scrimgeour's face, only a predatory look. "Do I? Do I know that for certain? I have only reassurances from you and your government along with the requests that I commit political suicide to fulfill your petty, personal vendetta. Minister Delacour, this would be a good time for you to leave my office. Your country would be better served in the future by sending someone less

involved with the matter. I will not consider it an insult, if that is what you are afraid of.”

“This isn’t over Scrimgeour!” the Frenchman bellowed.

“I agree. I also should mention that if our hero should find herself whisked away to France, that it might be slightly more than the British population would be willing to tolerate from a country that supplied so many of Voldemort’s fighters. Three of the five giants were from the French reservation. Seventy percent of the Vampires were French as were all of the Veelas. If we were to investigate further, I’m willing to bet that one or more of them might be blood relations to your wife. Now, begone!”

His door slammed with the exit of the French Foreign Minister. Rufus relaxed and allowed some of the tension to leave him. A witch entered from his side chamber.

“You baited him rather masterfully, Rufus. You’ve gotten better over the years.” Madame Faircloth said, chuckling from under her glammers.

“He suffers from an overabundance of pride. This is too personal to him, but I thank you for your compliment. Your pardon will be official in a few days and then I will start the process of getting your Undersecretary position restored. It will likely be an interim appointment, subject to frequent review, but that is the reality.”

She gave him a graceful smile. “I’m only too familiar with how the winds of change can blow.”

“Now what is the latest on the remaining Death Eaters?”

“Mulciber and Rookwood are leading them. They still have access to a considerable fortune, but are less than twenty in number. Of course they believe I will be their spy in the Ministry. Be certain that when I am questioned under Veritaserum that you ask whether I have had any *unauthorized* contact with Death Eaters.”

“Naturally. You will need to steer them towards operating out of Northern France. Our budget cannot currently sustain the Freedom

Guard, so I will decommission most of the force while funneling monies into domestic rebuilding for the next year. We will make dueling clubs a priority and foster an atmosphere of 'Never Again' amongst the population. In two to three years, when our people have mended their wounds and had their bellies filled with peace, that's when we identify the Death Eaters and their French Allies. With any luck, we'll have enough of a case to go to war against France."

"Do you still intend to pursue the same diplomatic agendas in Portugal and Spain that Lord Voldemort laid the groundwork for?"

"Yes, with those two countries as our allies we will push into France from two fronts. We will conquer and divide France and then turn our attention to the Ministries of Central Europe. In ten years England shall be the predominant force in Europe."

"What of Harry Potter?"

"He's had his fill of war. Unlike our Muggle counterparts, we haven't given up all of our possessions. One of our smaller islands in the Bahamas has been granted to him. He will be given his private retreat and a place to relax and enjoy his hard-earned victory away from the limelight. He plans to take his wife there for the birth of their children and to work on their marriage, now the war has been won. I find that attitude quite admirable. If necessary, I will arrange private tutors and for the NEWT examiners to travel there, if they should choose not to return for their seventh year."

She mulled it over, "And what of our plans, two years down the road?"

"The flashpoint of our coming conflict will likely come because of Narcissa, who will be handling his interests while he is out of the Isles. I will make it clear that I completely support her. If necessary, she will become our Helen of Troy. Harry is extremely loyal to those in his immediate circle and he values loyalty. I will be a very loyal ally of the Potter and Black families. Narcissa might spot something suspicious in the air, but then again, it would be in her best interest to not offer any quaint observations. Between that and the Death Eaters operating on French soil, it should be enough to gain at the very least

his tacit approval. If not, one or two of his other friends might need to be slain by the Death Eaters or French Agents in a reprisal.”

Madame Faircloth nodded, comprehending the situation. Potter’s role could be limited and funneled into their cause or he can be given the option to fade into the background. “I apologize, Rufus. I thought you had merely gotten better. Clearly, I have underestimated you.”

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*June 16th, 1997*

Among the overseas holdings of the British Ministry were several small islands in the Bahamas – one of which was renamed Godric’s Isle and deeded to Lord Potter in recognition of his service to the Wizarding World.

It was on this island two months ago that George Rubeus, Amelia Susan and Dana Katherine Potter came into this world. Harry and Susan opted not to return to Hogwarts for the remainder of the year and instead hired private tutors to continue their education.

Susan walked along the beach, listening to the waves crash on the sand. She was still a long way from regaining her figure, but the exercise was helping. She felt safe here. In addition to their tutors, there was a pair of bodyguards on staff. Their house elf, Trixie easily handled her duties and found time to be a superb nanny. Remus Lupin was a semi-permanent resident of the island. Also for the next few months, Charlie Weasley, Narcissa Black and Sirius William Black were here. There was some talk that Narcissa had persuaded Charlie to take the Black name as his own.

The island was as heavily warded as the rebuilt Azkaban. It would be a strong deterrent, but not nearly as frightening as the idea of taking on one of the men she approached. Her husband was not yet seventeen, but already known as one of the most powerful wizards in the world.

“Please tell me are not playing ‘bumper bassinets’ again!” She glared at Harry. He looked good. His training sessions with the bodyguards, instructors and Remus were not nearly as intense as before, but it

was clear that Harry was not going to allow his hard-earned skills to fade.

She might be biased, being married to him, but Susan considered herself a very lucky woman. His bronze colored magical arm was covered by a permanent glamour to make it appear normal, but with his island tan, he now matched the hue of his replacement arm. Remus had taken to calling him “Doc Savage” after the fictional “Man of Bronze” and had purchased Harry the books to read.

“No, we were not playing that.” Harry said smiling, but trying to sound indignant. “You’re just mad because you never win at bumper bassinets. Remus and I are actually doing something educational for our children.”

“Should I be scared?”

Harry waved his wand and the arrow spun on the magically resized “See and Say” coming to rest on a cow. “The cow goes Moo!”

Next he pointed his wand at the table and transfigured it into a cow and made it moo. “Look! I think Amelia’s smiling!”

Susan rolled her eyes, but was impressed at the casual display of power as she wondered how long he’d been doing this. “In a ten week old, it’s probably still gas.”

“Odds are with Ron, it’s probably still gas too.” Harry added.

Susan laughed as she burped her daughter. “I’ll be sure to tell him that when he gets here. When should we expect them?”

“Not for a few more weeks. Now that both he and Hermione are seventeen, they’re taking a trip across the Continent for a month or so with Hermione’s folks until Hermione gets bored of dragging him to museums and such. They’ll be here by the middle of July.”

“Think they’ll be engaged by the time they get here? I heard it through the grapevine that Justin had a long talk with Hannah’s father.”

“Well if Ron still wants to, after spending weeks with Hermione running his life, I reckon it must be love, but he really hasn’t given me any indication he’s going in that direction any time soon. We did get a nice thank you from Terry and Marietta Higgs for our wedding present.”

“Was that Scrimgeour’s lackey I saw over here earlier?”

“Yes.”

“What does the Minister want *this* time? The usual ‘dog and pony show’ where he begs you to show up in person at the Wizengamot?” Susan asked with a hint of bitterness in her tone.

“Actually, no. They want us to bring the triplets to St. Mungo’s for a ‘well baby’ checkup that just happens to coincide with the opening of a new wing of rooms.”

“Scrimgeour isn’t satisfied with trying to whore my husband out, so he’s going after my children too! The man is drunk on his own power!”

“Easy there freckles. I sent the nice Ministry employee on his way with a few pictures and a couple of quotes for the Daily Prophet. That’s all I’m in the mood to give right now. I’m spending the entire summer here. Some of Dumbledore’s old allies in the Wizengamot are keeping an eye on our Minister for me. He clearly wants me out of the way, which I don’t really mind, but that means he’s probably plotting something. I’m not the wide-eyed boy I was a year ago. That’s why I have met with the American President and the Canadian Minister. That’s why I’m going to attend the fall ICW session to receive yet another ridiculous honor. For now, Scrimgeour’s interests are aligned with ours, but he wouldn’t hesitate to paint me as the next Dark Lord if he wanted to neutralize me I want to head that off at the pass! We’ll put in an appearance or two in Britain during the last week in August, and I promised Headmistress McGonagall that we’d stop by the welcoming feast, but I think I’m right where I’m needed most.”

Susan placed her daughter back in the bassinet and made certain the sun protection charms on all three were potent enough before sitting in his lap and wrapping her arms around him. “I’ll let the freckles

comment slide, green eyes and you bet your skinny little arse that you're right where you're supposed to be."

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*August 5th, 1997*

Anne Carpenter sat looking out across the expanse of the Arizona desert. It was quite warm, bordering on insanely hot outside. She looked at the woman in front of her and smiled.

"Thank you again for seeing me on such short notice, Dean Richardson. I apologize for not being able to arrange for suitable child care. We're new to the area and I'm afraid I don't know anyone well enough to entrust my son to their care."

The older woman regarded Anne sternly but, she allowed her expression to soften upon seeing the small child in the young woman's arms. She took in the tiny tufts of red hair and the cobalt blue eyes that stared directly at her. "My, isn't he just the most adorable little boy. You're raising a little heart breaker. I'd normally be going on about my three grandchildren already, but we really should attend to business first. Now why is a nice English lady like yourself out here in the middle of nowhere, applying for a job that no one wants, teaching at a school that's only open because the Wizarding Congress has a treaty with these people to provide them training? Pity we couldn't just renege on our treaties like our mundane counterparts."

Anne turned and looked out the window, still cradling the baby to her chest. "You've no doubt heard about the war in England. It was awful. It cost me my child's father as well as my own. I wanted a fresh start away from England and this is where we ended up."

Norma Richardson's walked over and placed a comforting hand on Anne's back. "I'm sorry dear. Forgive a foolish old witch for asking. You see things in the papers and hear a thing or two on the wireless, but it all seems so distant."

Anne gave the woman a soft smile. "I don't blame you for asking. Being a widowed witch with a child carries a stigma that I've gotten used to. It's one of the things I didn't like back home."

"Oh you shouldn't worry. You're quite a pretty young thing. I think you'll have your pick of the wizards, though I wouldn't recommend recruiting locally among the heathens." Norma said, dropping her voice into a conspirator-like whisper.

"Goodness, it's too early for me to even begin thinking about that. I want to get my feet back under me, so to speak, before I even consider that!" Anne ignored the blatant bigotry from the woman.

"You've got a good head on your shoulders and impeccable records. I think I have met my new Charms Mistress! How are you on a broom?"

"I'm no Quidditch player, but I can hold my own."

"Our Master of Flight will be retiring at the end of the year. I'd rather not have to hire another one of them, if I don't have to. That will give me the justification to give you some of the larger quarters for you and your little one."

Anne gave a grateful smile. "I don't want to over commit myself just yet. I'd like to see how the course load goes this year."

They began to discuss salary and other terms when the Anne's son made some cooing noises and gestured with his tiny hand. Tiny shimmering lights flickered around his fingers.

"Oh my goodness! I've never seen accidental magic at such an early age. How old is he?"

"Anthony's just shy of nine months old. He's been doing this for a few weeks now, when he wants his mummy's attention. I'm guessing he's hungry. Is there a place I can take him for a feeding?"

"I have a private reading room just through that door. Go ahead and use it. I'm just amazed. You'll want to get him some private instruction as he grows up." The Dean of Treaty School Two leaned in to look at



the tiny boy. "Anthony Carpenter, we'll be expecting great things from you. My goodness! Did his eyes just turn red?"

Anne laughed, "Oh yes. They do that when he is excited. Just give mummy a second to get the potion supplement from my bag."

"You use a potion supplement? My daughter-in-law, Sharon uses them also. She swears by them. Do you brew your own?"

Anne nodded, "Home brewed. It's more expensive, but it's worth every sickle. Little Anthony is going to grow big and strong."

She carried her baby into the lavishly decorated room and smiled, seeing no paintings. The real Anne Carpenter had been a year ahead of Penelope. No one would ever find her body. Back on the east coast, things had gotten a bit dicey after Skeeter had been eliminated. It was time for a clean start. She applied the potion supplement to each nipple and stared into her child's eyes. "We'll start over here. There is a group of oppressed and disillusioned magical people waiting for a voice to lead them. They need a message. They need a direction. They need you."

What remained of Voldemort, albeit in a much smaller body, instinctively latched on. The other him had failed. This wasn't immortality, but an extension of his work with the diary that he had proven through the manipulation of the Vampire Coedus. The fool never realized that he had simply overwritten Frank Longbottom's memories with the Vampire's own. He had essentially killed himself that day.

The Vampire was a necessary proof of concept, brought to fruition in this new body now hosting the memories of the once and future Dark Lord. He was technically an imprint of Lord Voldemort performed on the unborn fetus. The ritual had nearly cost Penny her life, and it had only worked because his other self had absorbed Percy Weasley's magic, granting him a connection with the child.

Sadly, he would only be as powerful as this child's body could be, but Penny was a powerful witch and there were a bevy of rituals available to him and the wealth of experience left to him in journals written by

his former self. No, it truly wasn't immortality, but it was the next best thing and a true "flight from death."

His Goddaughter turned biological mother would provide a much better start than Merope Gaunt. He was curious if he would still be able to speak Parsel. He was able to make a few intelligible sounds at this point. It would still be a few more months before he could truly speak.

He would persevere. What was a year or two, when he had spent thirteen years as a disembodied spirit?

Penny was correct, the Native Americans should be resentful of their oppressors. This run-down school, with its half-hearted teaching staff will become the new training ground for his future army. The other him erred in recruiting the 'haves'. He would try it again with the "have-nots."

Anthony Lloyd Carpenter was a proud name. He'd refrain from idiotic anagrams this time. In a sense, he had already reinvented himself. Anthony was to honor Antonin. He mourned his passing.

Carpenter, what an ironic name; Voldemort reveled in the irony. He wouldn't be the first powerful being to start out a humble carpenter.

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